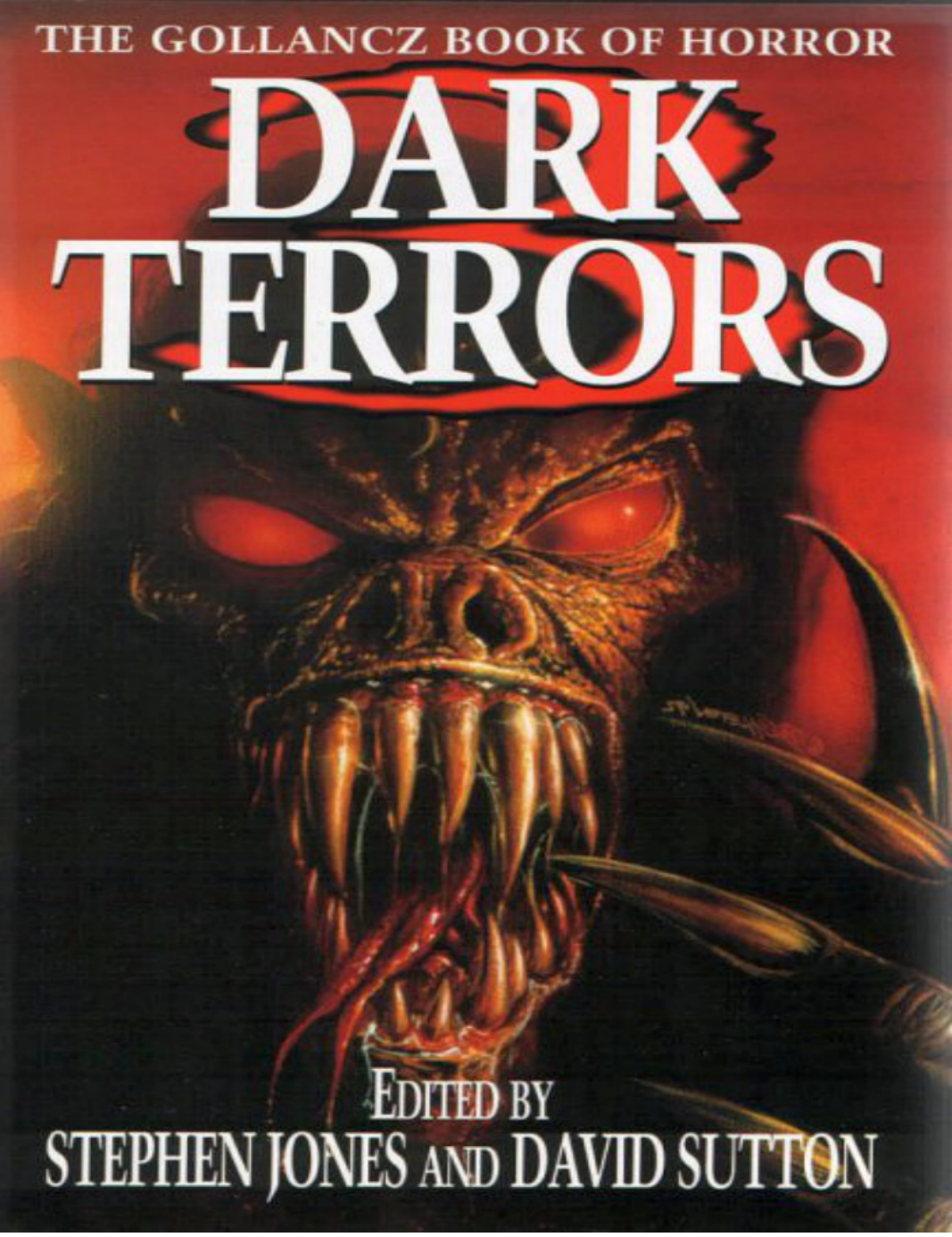
THE GOLLANCZ BOOK OF HORROR

DARK TERRORS



EDITED BY

STEPHEN JONES AND DAVID SUTTON

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Annotation

The award-winning team of Jones and Sutton once again push the boundaries of fear in this new collection of horror and dark fantasy. Drawing from both sides of the Atlantic, *Dark Terrors 3* features stories by some of the genres' biggest names as well as their rising stars, including Ray Bradbury, Poppy Z. Brite, Pat Cadigan, Ramsey Campbell, Christopher Fowler, Neil Gaiman, Julian Rathbone, Mark Timlin, and Michael Marshall Smith. An anthology that will take you to the furthest reaches of your imagination — and beyond.

British Fantasy Award winner 1998, World Fantasy Award nominee 1998.

- Dark Terrors 3:
  - INTRODUCTION
  - Free Dirt
  - Self-Made Man
  - The Price
  - Such a Nice Girl
  - Pieces
  - Aunt Libby’s Grave
  - The Horror Under Warrendown
  - Skinned Angels
  - The Windmill
  - Sharp Edges
  - This Is Your Life
  - Little Holocausts
  - Fat Mary
  - The Last Reel
  - Everybody Needs Somebody to Love
  - Sous Rature
  - Spanky’s Back In Town
  - Estate
  - Walking Wounded
  - The Lost Boy Found

Dark Terrors 3:
The Gollancz Book of Horror
Edited By Stephen Jones & David Sutton

INTRODUCTION

Although he was never actually our in-house editor (that dubious pleasure belongs to the inimitable Jo Fletcher), through his role as Editorial Director, Richard Evans became our 'spiritual guide' when we moved our series of original horror anthologies from Pan Books to Victor Gollancz in 1995.

Born in West Wales in 1950, Richard won a full scholarship to Oxford, where he studied Modern History and where he met his future wife, Ali. They were married in 1979 and had two children, Linnie and Stevie. After earning an MA in Social History at Sussex University, he decided against a career in teaching and entered the publishing industry in 1972 in the copy-writing department at Penguin Books.

Following a short stay at Fontana as a non-fiction editor, he moved to Macdonald/Futura, where he became a fiction editor specializing in science fiction. After moving to Arrow to head up its science fiction line, he returned to Macdonald in 1984 as Editorial Director, where he launched the successful Orbit SF imprint with the help of Senior Editor Toby Roxborough. He quickly became one of Britain's best-loved and most respected editors, nurturing the careers of such young writers as Paul J. McAuley, Mark Timlin, Mary Gentle, Michael Scott Rohan and many others.

In the late 1980s, Richard moved to Headline for a couple of years, before taking over the prestigious Gollancz science fiction and fantasy list in 1990 when Malcolm Edwards moved to HarperCollins.

A serious illness in 1994 resulted in him taking nearly a year off work, but he made a full recovery and triumphantly returned to Gollancz to launch the Vista mass-market paperback imprint.

During a relaxed lunch the week before he left on a business trip to New York, Richard talked excitedly about our line-up for *Dark Terrors 2* (which we had recently delivered). As always, he was positive about the number of newer writers we had included in the book, alongside such established names as Clive Barker, Peter Straub, Harlan Ellison, Ramsey Campbell and Brian Lumley. He was also particularly thrilled that we were publishing a new story by Thomas Tessier, whose latest novel *Fog Heart* he and Jo had just acquired for Gollancz.

Tragically, Richard didn't live to see the publication of *Dark Terrors 2*. Upon his return from New York he was hospitalized with pneumonia and died a few days later on May 26th, 1996, at the ridiculously young age of forty-six.

However, his enthusiasm and immaculate taste continue to help shape the series, and we shall endeavour to ensure that it will always

live up to his expectations. This latest volume of *Dark Terrors* is therefore respectfully dedicated to the memory of Richard Evans, an outstanding editor and a fine friend.

Stephen Jones and David Sutton
May, 1997

Free Dirt
RAY BRADBURY

The cemetery was in the centre of the city. On four sides, it was bounded by gliding streetcars on glistening blue tracks and cars with exhaust fumes and sound. But, once inside the wall, the world was lost. For half a mile in four directions, the cemetery raised midnight trees and headstones that grew from the earth, like pale mushrooms, moist and cold. A gravel path led back into darkness and within the gate stood a Gothic Victorian house with six gables and a cupola. The front porch light showed an old man there alone, not smoking, not reading, not moving, silent. If you took a deep breath, he smelled of the sea, of urine, of papyrus, of kindling, of ivory, and of teak. His false teeth moved his mouth automatically when it wanted to talk. His tiny yellow seed eyes twitched and his poke-hole nostrils thinned as a stranger crunched up the gravel path and set foot on the porch step.

'Good evening!' said the stranger, a young man, perhaps twenty.

The old man nodded, but his hands lay quietly on his knees.

'I saw that sign out front,' the stranger went on. '"Free Dirt", it said.'

The old man almost nodded.

The stranger tried a smile. 'Crazy, but that sign caught my eye.'

There was a glass fan over the front door. A light shone through this glass fan, coloured blue, red, yellow, and touched the old man's face. It seemed not to bother him.

'I wondered, free dirt? Never struck me you'd have much left over. When you dig a hole and put the coffin in and refill the hole, you haven't much dirt left, have you? I should think…' "

The old man leaned forward. It was so unexpected that the stranger pulled his foot off the bottom step.

'You *want* some?' said the old man.

'Why, no, no, I was just curious. Signs like that make you curious.'

'Set down,' said the old man.

'Thanks.' The young man sat uneasily on the steps. 'You know how it is, you walk around and never think how it is to own a graveyard.'

'And?' said the old man.

'I mean, like how much time it takes to dig graves.'

The old man leaned back in his chair. 'On a cool day, two hours. Hot day, four. Very hot day, six. Very cold day, not cold so it freezes, but *real* cold, a man can dig a grave in one hour so he can head in for

hot chocolate, brandy in the chocolate. Then again you get a good man on a hot day, he's no better than a bad man in the cold. Might take eight hours to open up, but there's easy digging soil here. All loam, no rocks.'

'I'm curious about winter.'

'In blizzards we got a ice-box mausoleum to stash the dead undelivered mail — until spring and a whole month of shovels and spades.'

'Seeding and planting time, eh?' The stranger laughed.

'You might say that.'

'Don't you dig in winter anyhow? For special funerals? *Special* dead?"

'Some yards got a hose-shovel contraption. Pump hot water through the blade; shape a grave quick, like placer mining, even with the ground a ice pond. We don't cotton to that. Use picks and shovels.'

The young man hesitated. 'Does it bother you?'

'You mean, I get scared ever?'

'Well.. yes.'

The old man took out and stuffed his pipe with tobacco, tamped it with a calloused thumb, lit it, and let out a small stream of smoke.

'No,' he said at last.

The young man's shoulders sank.

'Disappointed?' said the old man.

'I thought maybe once.?'

'Oh, when you're young maybe. One time. '

'Then, there *was* a time!' The young man shifted up a step.

The old man glanced at him sharply. 'One time.' He stared at the marbled hills and the dark trees. 'My grandpa owned this yard. I was born here. A gravedigger's son learns to ignore things.'

The old man took a number of deep puffs and said, 'I was just eighteen, folks off on vacation, me left to tend things alone, mow the lawn, dig holes, and such. Alone, four graves to dig in October and a cold came hard off the lake, frost on the graves, tombstones like snow, ground froze solid.

'One night I walked out. No moon. Hard grass under foot, could see my breath, hands in my pockets, walking, listening.'

The old man exhaled frail ghosts from his thin nostrils. 'Then I heard this sound, deep under. I froze. It was a voice, screaming. Someone woke up buried, heard me walk by, cried out. I just *stood.* They screamed and screamed. Earth banged. On a cold night, ground's like porcelain, rings, you see?

'Well.' The old man shut his eyes to remember. 'I stood like the wind off the lake stopped my blood. A joke? I searched around and thought, Imagination! No, it was underfoot, sharp, clear. A woman's

voice. I *knew* all the gravestones.' The old man's eyelids trembled. 'Could recite them alphabetical, year, month, day. Name any year, and I'll tell. 1899? Jake Smith departed. 1923? Betty Dallman lost. 1933? P.H. Moran! Name a month. August? August last year, buried Henrietta Wells. August 1918? Grandma Hanlon, whole family! Influenza! Name a day. August fourth? Smith, Burke, Shelby carried off. Williamson? He's on that hill. Douglas? By the creek. '

'The *story,'* the young man urged.

'Eh?'

'The story you were telling.'

'Oh, the voice below? Well, I knew all the stones. Standing there I guessed that voice out of the ground was Henrietta Fremwell, fine girl, twenty-four years, played piano at the Elite Theatre. Tall, graceful, blonde. How did I know her voice? I stood where there was only men's graves. Hers was the only woman's. I ran to put my ear on her stone. Yes! Her voice, way down, screaming!

'"Miss Fremwell!" I shouted.

'"Miss Fremwell!" I yelled again.

'Deep down I heard her, only weeping now. Maybe she heard me, maybe not. She just cried. I ran downhill so fast I tripped and split my head on a stone, got up, screamed myself! Got to the toolshed, all blood, dragged out the tools, and just stood there with one shovel. The ground was ice solid. I fell back against a tree. It would take three minutes to get back to her grave and eight hours to dig to her box. The ground was like glass. A coffin is a coffin; only so much space for air. Henrietta had been buried two days before the freeze, been asleep all that time, using up air, and it rained just before the cold spell and the earth over her, soaked with rainwater, now froze. I'd have to dig maybe eight hours. And the way she cried, there wasn't another hour of air left.'

The old man's pipe had gone out. He rocked in his chair, back and forth, back and forth, silently.

'But,' said the young man, 'what did you do?'

'Nothing,' said the old man.

'Nothing?'

Nothing I *could* do. That ground was solid. Six men couldn't have dug that grave. No hot water near. And she might've been screaming hours before I heard, so..'

'You did. nothing?'

'Something. Put the shovel back in the toolshed, locked it, and went back to the house and built a fire and drank some hot chocolate, shivering and shivering. Would you have done different?'

'I. '

'Would you have dug for eight hours in hard ice rock so's to reach

her when she was truly dead of exhaustion, cold, smothered, and have to bury her all over again? Then call her folks and *tell* them?'

The young man was silent. On the porch, the mosquitoes hummed about the naked light bulb.

'I see,' said the young man.

The old man sucked his pipe. 'I think I cried all night because there was nothing I could do.' He opened his eyes and stared about, surprised, as if he had been listening to someone else.

'That's quite a story,' said the young man.

'No,' said the old man. 'God's truth. Want to hear more? See that big stone with the ugly angel? That was Adam Crispin's. Relatives fought, got a writ from a judge, dug him up hoping for poison. Found nothing. Put him back, but by that time, the dirt from his grave mixed with other dirts. We shovelled in stuff from all around. Next plot, the angel with broken wings? Mary Lou Phipps. Dug her up to lug her off to Elgin, Illinois. More relatives. Where she'd been, the pit stayed open, oh, three weeks. No funerals. Meanwhile, her dirt got cross-shovelled with others. Six stones over, one stone north, that was Henry Douglas Jones. Became famous sixty years after no one paid attention. Now he's planted under the Civil War monument. His grave lay wide two months, nobody wanted to utilize the hole of a Southerner, all of us leaning North with Grant. So his dirt got scattered. That give you some notion of what that "Free Dirt" sign means?'

The young man eyed the cemetery landscape. 'Well,' he said, 'where is that dirt you're handing out?'

The old man pointed with his pipe, and the stranger looked and, indeed, by a nearby wall was a sizeable hillock some ten feet long by about three feet high, loam and grass tufts of many shades of tan, brown, and burnt umber.

'Go look,' said the old man.

The young man walked slowly over to stand by the mound.

'Kick it,' said the old man. 'See if it's real.'

The young man kicked, and his face paled.

'Did you hear that?' he said.

'What?' said the old man, looking somewhere else.

The stranger listened and shook his head. 'Nothing.'

'Well, now,' said the old man, knocking out the ashes from his pipe. 'How much free dirt you need?'

'I hadn't thought.'

'Yes, you have,' said the old man, 'or you wouldn't have driven your lightweight delivery truck up by the gate. I got cat's ears. Heard your motor just when you stopped. How much?'

'Oh,' said the young man uneasily. 'My backyard's eighty feet by

forty. I could use a good inch of topsoil. So…?'

'I'd say,' said the old man, 'half of that mound there. Hell, take it. Nobody wants it.'

'You mean. '

'I mean, that mound has been growing and diminishing, diminishing and growing, mixtures up and down, since Grant took Richmond and Sherman reached the sea. There's Civil dirt there, coffin splinters, satin casket shreds from when Lafayette met the honour guards. Edgar Allan Poe. There's funeral flowers, blossoms from ten hundred obsequies. Condolence card confetti for Hessian troopers, Parisian gunners who never shipped home. That soil is so laced with bone meal and casket corsages I should charge *you* to buy the lot. Grab a spade before I do.'

'Stay right there.' The young man raised one hand.

'I'm not going anywhere,' said the old man. 'Nor is anyone else nearby.

The half-truck was pulled up by the dirt mound and the young man was reaching in for a spade, when the old man said, 'No, I think not.'

The old man went on.

'Graveyard spade's best. Familiar metal, familiar soil. Easy digging, when like takes to like. So. '

The old man's head indicated a spade half-stuck in the dark mound. The young man shrugged and moved.

The cemetery spade came free with a soft whispering. Pellets of ancient mound fell with similar whispers.

He began to dig and shift and fill the back of his half-truck as the old man, from the corners of his eyes, observed, 'It's more than dirt, as I said. War of 1812, San Juan Hill, Manassas, Gettysburg, October flu epidemic 1918, all strewn from graves filled and evicted to be refilled. Various occupants leavened out to dust, various glories melted to mixtures, rust from metal caskets, coffin handles, shoelaces but no shoes, hairs long and short. Ever see wreaths made of hair saved to weave crowns to fix on mortal pictures? All that's left of a smile or that funny look in the eyes of someone who knows she's not alive any more, ever. Hair, epaulettes, not whole ones, but one strand of epaulettes, all there, along with blood that's gone to silt.'

The young man finished, sweating, and started to thrust the spade back in the earth when the old man said:

'Take it. Cemetery dirt, cemetery spade, like takes to like.'

'I'll bring it back tomorrow.' The young man tossed the spade into the mounded truck.

'No. You got the dirt, so keep the spade. Just don't bring that free

dirt back.'

'Why would I do that?'

'Just don't,' said the old man, but did not move as the young man climbed in his truck to start the engine.

He sat listening to the dirt mound tremble and whisper in the flatbed.

'What're you waiting for?' asked the old man.

The flimsy half-truck ran towards the last of the twilight, pursued by the ever-encroaching dark. Clouds raced overhead, perturbed by the invisible. Back on the horizon, thunder sounded. A few drops of rain fell on the windshield, causing the young man to ram his foot on the gas and swerve into his home street even as the sun truly died, the wind rose, and the trees around his cottage bent and beckoned.

Climbing out, he stared at the sky and then his house and then the empty garden. A few drops of cold rain on his cheeks decided him; he drove the rattling half-truck into the empty garden, unlatched the metal back flap, opened it just an inch so as to allow a proper flow, and then began motoring back and forth across the garden, letting the dark stuffs whisper down, letting the strange midnight earth shift and murmur, until, at last, the truck was empty and stood in the blowing night, watching the wind stir the black soil.

Then he locked the truck in the garage and went to stand on the back porch thinking, I won't need water. The storm will soak the ground.

He stood for a long while simply staring at the graveyard mulch waiting for rain until he thought, What am I waiting for? Jesus! And went in.

At 10 o'clock, a light rain tapped on the windows and sifted over the dark garden. At 11, it rained so steadily that the gutter drains swallowed and rattled. At midnight, the rain grew heavy. He looked to see if it was eroding the new dark earth, but only saw the black muck drinking the downpour, like a great black sponge, lit by distant flares of lightning.

Then, at 1 in the morning, the greatest Niagara of all shuddered the house, rinsed the windows to blindness, and shook the lights.

And then, abruptly, the downpour ceased, followed by one great downfall blow of lightning, which ploughed and pinioned the dark earth close by, near, outside, with explosions of light as if ten thousand flashbulbs had been fired off. Then darkness fell in curtains of thunder, cracking the heart, breaking the bones.

In bed, wishing for the merest dog to hold, for lack of human company, hugging the sheets, burying his head, then rising full to the silent air, the dark air, the storm gone, the rain shut, and a silence

spread in whispers as the last drench melted into the trembling soil. He shuddered and then shivered and then hugged himself to stop the shivering of his cold flesh, and he was thirsty, but could not make himself move to find the kitchen and drink water, milk, leftover wine, anything. He lay back, dry-mouthed, with unreasonable tears filling his eyes.

Free dirt, he thought. My God what a damn fool night. *Free dirt!*

At 2 o'clock he heard his wristwatch ticking softly.

At 2:30 he felt his pulse in his wrists and ankles and neck and then in his temples and inside his head.

The entire house leaned in the wind, listening.

Outside in the still night, the wind failed and the yard lay soaking and waiting.

And at last. *yes.* He opened his eyes and turned his head towards the window.

He held his breath. What? Yes? What?

Beyond the window, beyond the wall, beyond the house, outside somewhere, a whisper, a murmur, growing louder and louder. Grass growing? Blossoms opening? Soil shifting, crumbling?

A great whisper, a mix of shadows and shades. Something rising. Something moving.

Ice froze beneath his skin. His heart ceased.

Outside in the dark, in the yard.

Autumn had arrived.

October was there.

His garden gave him.

A *harvest.*

* * *

Ray Bradbury is, without doubt, our most distinguished living fantasy writer. Cutting his literary teeth in the memorable pages of *Weird Tales* in the 1940s, his early stories from that pulp magazine were reprinted in the Arkham House collection *Dark Carnival,* published in 1947. Known principally for his short fiction, he has sold his work to all the major magazines in the intervening fifty years, and his many tales of science fiction, fantasy and horror have been widely collected. *The Martian Chronicles, The Illustrated Man, The Golden Apples of the Sun, The October Country, A Medicine for Melancholy, I Sing the Body Electric* and *Long After Midnight* are just a few of the evocative titles that hint at the equally atmospheric prose to be found in Ray

Bradbury's timeless fiction. He is also the author of several classic novels, including *Something Wicked This Way Comes, Fahrenheit 451, Dandelion Wine, The Halloween Tree* and, more recently, *Death is a Lonely Business* and *A Graveyard for Lunatics*. His screenwriting credits include *Moby Dick* (for John Huston) and *It Came from Outer Space,* and since 1985 he has adapted his own short stories for *The Ray Bradbury Theater*. 'I took a couple of years off, and did sixty-five teleplays for my TV series, plus a couple of screenplays,' says Bradbury. 'But I wanted to get back to my root system — because I started as a short story writer when I was twelve. I had a lot of ideas put away, just old scribbled notes I started going through.' The result was a number of new short stories written during the last year or so, including 'Free Dirt', which have been collected in *Quicker Than the Eye*.

Self-Made Man
POPPY Z. BRITE

Justin had read *Dandelion Wine* seventeen times now, but he still hated to see it end. He always hated endings.

He turned the last page of the book and sat for several minutes in the shadows of his bedroom, cradling the old thumbed paperback, marvelling at the world he held in his hands. The hot sprawl of the city outside was forgotten; he was still lost in the cool green Byzantium of 1928.

Within these tattered covers, dawning realization of his own mortality might turn a boy into a poet, not a dark machine of destruction. People only died after saying to each other all the things that needed to be said, and the summer never truly ended so long as those bottles gleamed down cellar, full of the distillate of memory.

For Justin, the distillate of memory was a bitter vintage. The summer of 1928 seemed impossibly long ago, beyond imagining, forty years before blasted sperm met cursed egg to make him. When he put the book aside and looked at the dried blood under his fingernails, it seemed even longer.

An artist who doesn't read is no artist at all, he had scribbled in a notebook he once tried to keep, but abandoned after a few weeks, sick of his own thoughts. *Books are the key to other minds, sure as bodies are the key to other souls. Reading a good book is a lot like sinking your fingers up to the second knuckle in someone's brain.*

In the world of the story, no one left before it was time. Characters in a book never went away; all you had to do was open the book again and there they'd be, right where you left them. He wished live people were so easy to hold on to.

You could hold on to *parts* of them, of course; you could even make them part of yourself. That was easy. But to keep a whole person with you for ever, to stop just one person from leaving or gradually disintegrating as they always did… to just *hold* someone. *All* of someone.

There might be ways. There had to be ways.

Even in Byzantium, a Lonely One stalked and preyed.

Justin was curled up against the headboard of his bed, a bloodstained comforter bunched around his bare legs. This was his favourite reading spot. He glanced at the nightstand, which held a Black & Decker electric drill, a pair of scissors, a roll of paper towels, and a syringe full of chlorine bleach. The drill wasn't plugged in yet. He closed his eyes and allowed a small slow shudder to run through

his body, part dread, part desire.

There were screams carved on the air of his room, vital fluids dried deep within his mattress, whole lives sewn into the lining of his pillow, to be taken out and savoured later. There was always time, so long as you didn't let your memories get away. He had kept most of his. In fact, he'd kept seventeen; all but the first two, and those he didn't want.

Justin's father had barely seen him out of the womb before disappearing into the seamy nightside of Los Angeles. His mother raised him on the continent's faulty rim, in an edging-towards-poor neighbourhood of a city that considered its poor a kind of toxic waste: ceaselessly and unavoidably churned out by progress, hard to store or dispose of, foul-smelling and ugly and dangerous. Their little stucco house was at the edge of a vast slum, and Justin's dreams were peppered with gunfire, his play permeated with the smell of piss and garbage. He was often beaten bloody just for being a scrawny white boy carrying a book. His mother never noticed his hands scraped raw on concrete, or the thin crust of blood that often formed between his oozing nose and mouth by the time he got home.

She had married again and moved to Reno as soon as Justin turned eighteen, as soon as she could turn her painfully awkward son out of the house. *You could be a nice-looking young man if you cleaned yourself up. You're smart, you could get a good job and make money. You could have girlfriends,* as if looks and money and girlfriends were the sweetest things he could ever dream of.

Her new husband had been a career Army man who looked at Justin the way he looked at their ragged old sofa, as leftover trash from her former life. Now they were both ten years dead, their bones mummified or scattered by animals somewhere in the Nevada desert, in those beautiful blasted lands. Only Justin knew where.

He'd shot his stepfather first, once in the back of the head with his own Army service pistol, just to see the surprise on his mother's face as brain and bone exploded across the glass top of her brand-new dinner table, as her husband's blood dripped into the mashed potatoes and the meatloaf, rained into her sweating glass of tea. He thought briefly that this surprise was the strongest emotion he had ever seen there. The sweetest, too. Then he pointed the gun at it and watched it blossom into chaos.

Justin remembered clearing the table, noticing that one of his mother's eyes had landed in her plate, afloat on a thin patina of blood and grease. He tilted the plate a little and the glistening orb rolled on to the floor. It made a small satisfying squelch beneath the heel of his shoe, a sound he felt more than heard.

No one ever knew he had been out of California. He drove their

gas-guzzling luxury sedan into the desert, dumped them and the gun. He returned to LA by night, by Greyhound bus, drinking bitter coffee and reading at rest stops, watching the country unspool past his window, the starlit desert and highway and small sleeping towns, the whole wide-open landscape folding around him like an envelope or a concealing hand. He was safe among other human flotsam. No one ever remembered his face. No one considered him capable of anything at all, let alone murder.

After that he worked and read and drank compulsively, did little else for a whole year. He never forgot that he was capable of murder, but he thought he had buried the urge. Then one morning he woke up with a boy strewn across his bed, face and chest battered in, abdomen torn wide open. Justin's hands were still tangled in the glistening purple stew of intestines. From the stains on his skin he could see that he had rubbed them all over his body, maybe rolled in them.

He didn't remember meeting the boy, didn't know how he had killed him or opened his body like a big wet Christmas present, or why. But he kept the body until it started to smell, and then he cut off the head, boiled it until the flesh was gone, and kept the skull. After that it never stopped again. They had all been boys, all young, thin, and pretty: everything the way Justin liked it. Weapons were too easy, too impersonal, so he drugged them and strangled them. Like Willy Wonka in the Technicolor bowels of his chocolate factory, *he* was the music maker, and *he* was the dreamer of dreams.

It was a dark and lonely revelry, to be sure. But so was writing; so was painting or learning music. So, he supposed, was all art when you penetrated to its molten core. He didn't know if killing was art, but it was the only creative thing he had ever done.

He got up, slid *Dandelion Wine* back into its place on his crowded bookshelf, and left the bedroom. He put his favourite CD on shuffle and crossed his small apartment to the kitchenette. A window beside the refrigerator looked out on a brick wall. Frank Sinatra was singing 'I've Got You Under My Skin'.

Justin opened the refrigerator and took out a package wrapped in foil. Inside was a ragged cut of meat as large as a dinner plate, deep red, tough and fibrous. He selected a knife from the jumble of filthy dishes in the sink and sliced off a piece of meat the size of his palm. He wasn't very hungry, but he needed something in his stomach to soak up the liquor he'd be drinking soon.

Justin heated oil in a skillet, sprinkled the meat with salt, laid it in the sizzling fat and cooked it until both sides were brown and the bottom of the pan was awash with fragrant juices. He slid the meat on to a saucer, found a clean fork in the silverware drawer, and began to eat his dinner standing at the counter.

The meat was rather tough, but it tasted wonderful, oily and salty with a slight undertone of musk. He felt it breaking down in the acids of his saliva and his stomach, felt its proteins joining with his cells and becoming part of him. That was fine.

But after tonight he would have something better. A person who lived and stayed with him, whose mind belonged to him. A homemade zombie. Justin knew it was possible, if only he could destroy the right parts of the brain. If a drill and a syringeful of bleach didn't work, he would try something else next time.

The night drew like a curtain across the window, stealing his wall view brick by brick. Sinatra's voice was as smooth and sweet as cream. *Got you. deep in the heart of me.* Justin nodded reflectively. The meat left a delicately metallic flavour on his tongue, one of the myriad tastes of love. Soon it would be time to go out.

Apart from the trip to Reno and the delicious wallow in the desert, Justin had never left Los Angeles. He longed to drive out into the desert, to find again the ghost towns and nuclear moonscapes he had so loved in Nevada. But he never had. You needed a car to get out there. If you didn't have a car in LA, you might as well curl up and die. Los Angeles was a city with an enormous central nervous system, but no brain.

Since being fired from his job at an orange juice plant for chronic absenteeism — too many bodies demanding his time, requiring that he cut them up, preserve them, consume them — Justin wasn't even sure how much longer he would be able to afford the apartment. But he didn't see how he could move out with things the way they were in here. The place was a terrible mess. His neighbours had started complaining about the smell.

Justin decided not to think about all that now. He still had a little money saved, and a city bus would get him from his Silver Lake apartment to the garish carnival of West Hollywood; that much he knew. It had done so countless times.

If he was lucky, he'd be bringing home company.

Suko ran fingers the colour of sandalwood through haphazardly cut black hair, painted his eyes with stolen drugstore kohl, and grinned at himself in the cracked mirror over the sink. He fastened a string of thrift-shop Mardi Gras beads around his neck, studied the effect of the purple plastic against torn black cotton and smooth brown skin, then added a clay amulet of the Buddha and a tiny wooden penis, both strung on leather thongs.

These he had purchased among the dim stalls at Wat Rajanada, the amulet market near Klong Saensaep in Bangkok. The amulet was to protect him against accidents and malevolent ghosts. The penis was

to increase his potency, to make sure whoever he met up with tonight would have a good time. It was supposed to be worn on a string around his waist, but the first few times he'd done that, his American lovers gave him strange looks.

The amulets were the last thing Suko bought with Thai money before boarding a California-bound jet and bidding farewell to his sodden homeland, most likely for ever. He'd had to travel a long way from Patpong Road to get them, but he didn't know whether one could buy magical amulets in America. Apparently one could: attached to his Mardi Gras beads had once been a round medallion stamped with an exaggerated Negro face and the word zulu. He'd lost the medallion on a night of drunken revelry, which was as it should be. *Mai pen rai. No problem.*

Suko was nineteen. His full name was unpronounceable by American tongues, but he didn't care. American tongues could do all sorts of other things for him. This he had learned at fourteen, after hitching a midnight ride out of his home village, a place so small and so poor that it appeared on no map foreign eyes would ever see.

His family had always referred to the city by its true name, Krung Thep, the Great City of Angels. Suko had never known it by any other name until he arrived there. Krung Thep was only an abbreviation for the true name, which was more than thirty syllables long. For some reason, *farangs* had never got used to this. They all called it Bangkok, a name like two sharp handclaps.

In the streets, the harsh reek of exhaust fumes was tinged with a million subtler perfumes: jasmine, raw sewage, grasshoppers frying in peppered oil, the odour of ripe durian fruit that was like rotting flesh steeped in thick sweet cream. The very air seemed spritzed with alcohol, soaked with neon and the juices of sex.

He found his calling on Patpong 3, a block-long strip of gay bars and nightclubs in Bangkok's famous sleaze district. In the village, Suko and his seven brothers and sisters had gutted fish for a few *baht* a day. Here he was paid thirty times as much to drink and dance with *farangs* who told him fascinating stories, to make his face prettier with make-up, to be fondled and flattered, to have his cock sucked as often as he could stand it. If he had to suck a few in return, how bad could that be? It was far from the worst thing he had ever put in his mouth. He rather liked the taste of sperm, if not the odd little tickle it left in the back of his throat.

He enjoyed the feel of male flesh against his own and the feel of strong arms enfolding him, loved never knowing what the night would bring. He marvelled at the range of body types among Americans and English, Germans and Australians. Some had skin as soft and pale as rice-flour dough; some were covered with thick hair like wool,

matting their chests and arms. They might be fat or emaciated, squat or ponderously tall, ugly, handsome, or forgettable. All the Thai boys he knew were lean, light brown, small-boned and smooth-skinned, with sweet androgynous faces. So was he. So was Noy.

From the cheap boom box in the corner of the room, Robert Smith sang that Suko made him feel young again. Suko scowled at the box. Noy had given him that tape, a poor-quality Bangkok bootleg of The Cure, right after Suko first spoke of leaving the country. Last year. The year Suko decided to get on with his life.

The rest of them, these other slim raven-haired heartbreakers, they thought they would be able to live like this for ever. They were seventeen, fifteen, younger. They were in love with their own faces in the mirror, jet-coloured eyes glittering with drink and praise, lips bruised from too many rough kisses, too much expert use. They could not see themselves at thirty, could not imagine the roughening of their skin or the lines that bar life would etch into their faces. Some would end up hustling over on Soi Cowboy, Patpong's shabby cousin where the beer was cheaper and the tinsel tarnished, where the neon flickered fitfully or not at all. Some would move to the streets.

And some would simply disappear. Suko intended to be one of those.

Noy was just his age, and smart. Suko met him onstage at the Hi-Way Bar. They were performing the biker act, in which two boys sat facing each other astride the saddle of a Harley-Davidson, wearing only leather biker caps, tongue-kissing with sloppy abandon and masturbating each other while a ring of sweaty *farang* faces gathered around them.

Immediately afterward, while the cum was still oozing between the thrumming saddle and the backs of their skinny thighs, Noy murmured into Suko's mouth, 'Wouldn't they be surprised if we just put this thing in gear and drove it into the crowd?'

Suko pulled back and stared at him. Noy's left arm was draped lazily around Suko's neck; Noy's right hand cupped Suko's cock, now tugging gently, now relaxing. Noy smiled and lifted one perfect eyebrow, and Suko found himself getting hard again for someone who wasn't even paying him.

Noy gave him a final squeeze and let go. 'Don't make a date when you get done working,' he told Suko. 'Take me home with you.'

Suko did, and even after a night on Patpong, they puzzled out one another's bodies like the streets of an unfamiliar city. Soon they were the undisputed stars of the Hi-Way's live sex shows; they knew how to love each other in private and how to make it look good in public. They made twice as much money as the other boys. Suko started saving up for a plane ticket.

But Noy spent his money on trinkets: T-shirts printed with obscene slogans, little bags of pot and pills, even a green glow-in-the-dark dildo to use in their stage show. In the end, Noy was just smart enough to make his stupidity utterly infuriating.

I'm really leaving, Suko would tell him as they lay entwined on a straw pallet in the room they rented above a cheap restaurant, as the odours of *nam pla* and chili oil wafted through the open window to mingle with the scent of their lovemaking. *When I save up enough, I'm going to do it. You can come, but I won't wait for you once I have the money, not knowing how many ways I could lose this chance.*

But Noy never believed him, not until the night Suko showed him the one-way ticket. And how Noy cried then, real tears such as Suko had never thought to see from him, great childish tears that reddened his smooth skin and made his eyes swell to slits. He clutched at Suko's hands and slobbered on them and begged him not to go until Suko wanted to shove him face-first into the Patpong mud.

This is all you want? Suko demanded, waving a hand at the tawdry neon, the ramshackle bars, the Thai boys and girls putting everything on display with a clearly marked price tag: their flesh, their hunger, and if they stayed long enough, their souls. *This is enough for you? Well, it isn't enough for me.*

Noy had made his choices, had worked hard for them. But Suko had made his choices too, and no one could ever take them away. The city where he lived now, Los Angeles, was one of his choices. Another city of angels.

He had left Noy sobbing in the middle of Patpong 3, unable or unwilling to say goodbye. Now half a world lay between them, and with time, Suko's memories of Noy soured into anger. He had been nothing but a jaded, fiercely erotic, selfish boy, expecting Suko to give up the dreams of a lifetime for a few more years of mindless pleasure. *Asshole,* Suko thought, righteous anger flaring in his heart. *Jerk. Geek.*

Now Robert Smith wanted Suko to fly him to the moon. As reasonable a demand, really, as any Noy had handed him. Suko favoured the boom box with his sweetest smile and carefully shaped his mouth round a phrase:

'Get a life, Robert!'

'I will always love you,' Robert moaned.

Suko kept grinning at the box. But now an evil gleam came into his black eyes, and he spat out a single word.

'Not!'

Justin hit the bars hard and fast, pounding back martinis, which he couldn't help thinking of as martians ever since he'd read *The Shining.* Soon his brain felt pleasantly lubricated, half-numb.

He had managed to find five or six bars he liked within walking distance of each other, no mean feat in LA. Just now he was leaning against the matte-grey wall of the Wounded Stag, an expensive club eerily lit with blue bulbs and black-lights. He let his eyes sweep over the crowd, then drift back to the sparkling drink in his hand. The gin shattered the light, turned it silver and razor-edged. The olive bobbed like a tiny severed head in a bath of caustic chemicals.

Something weird was happening on TV. Justin had walked out of Club 312, a cosy bar with Sinatra on the jukebox that was normally his favourite place to relax with a drink before starting the search for company. Tonight 312 was empty save for a small crowd of regulars clustered around the flickering set in the corner. He couldn't tell what was going on, since none of the regulars ever talked to him, or he to them.

But from the scraps of conversation — *eaten alive, night of the living dead* — and edgy laughter he caught, Justin assumed some channel was showing a Hallowe'en horror retrospective. The holiday fell next week and he'd been meaning to get some candy. You ought to have something to offer trick-or-treaters if you were going to invite them in.

He heard a newscaster's voice saying, 'This has been a special report. We'll keep you informed throughout the evening as more information becomes available. ' Could that be part of a horror filmfest? A fake, maybe, like that radio broadcast in the thirties that had driven people to slit their wrists. They'd been afraid of Martians, Justin remembered. He downed the last of his own martian and left the bar. He didn't care about the news. He would be making his own living dead tonight.

The Wounded Stag had no TV. Pictures were *passé* here, best left to that stillborn golden calf that was the *other* Hollywood. Sound was the thing, pounds and pounds of it pushing against the eardrums, saturating the brain, making the very skin feel tender and bruised if you withstood it long enough. Beyond headache lay transcendence.

The music at the Stag was mostly psycho-industrial, Skinny Puppy and Einstürzende Neubaten and Ministry, the Butthole Surfers and Nine Inch Nails and My Bloody Valentine. Justin liked the names of the bands better than he liked the music. The only time they played Sinatra here was at closing hour, when they wanted to drive people out.

But the Stag was where the truly beautiful boys came, the drop-dead boys who could get away with shaving half their hair and dyeing the other half dead black or lurid violet, or wearing it long and stringy and filthy, or piercing their faces twenty times. They swept through the door wrapped in their leather, their skimpy fishnet, their jangling

rings and chains, as if they wore precious jewels and ermine. They allowed themselves one contemptuous glance around the bar, then looked at no one. If you wanted their attention, you had to make a bid for it: an overpriced drink, a compliment that was just ambiguous enough to be cool. Never, ever a smile.

Like as not, you would be rejected summarily and without delay. But if even a spark of interest flared in those coldly beautiful black-rimmed eyes, what sordid fantasy! What exotic passion! What delicious viscera!

He had taken four boys home from the Stag on separate nights. They were still in his apartment, their organs wrapped neatly in plastic film inside his freezer, their hands tucked within easy reach under his mattress, their skulls nestled in a box in the closet. Justin smiled at them all he wanted to now, and they grinned right back at him. They had to. He had boiled them down to the bone, and all skulls grinned because they were so happy to be free of imprisoning flesh.

But skulls and mummified hands and salty slices of meat weren't enough any more. He wanted to keep the face, the thrilling pulse in the chest and guts, the sweet slick inside of the mouth and anus. He wanted to wrap his mouth around a cock that would grow hard without his having to shove a finger up inside it like some desiccated puppet. He wanted to keep a boy, not a motley collection of bits. And he wanted that boy to smile at him, *for* him, for *only* him.

Justin dragged his gaze away from the swirling depths of his martian and glanced at the door. The most beautiful boy he had ever seen was just coming in. And he was smiling: a big, sunny, unaffected and utterly guileless smile.

Suko leaned his head against the tall blond man's shoulder and stared out the window of the taxi. The candy panorama of West Hollywood spread out before them, neon smeared across hot asphalt, marabou cowboys and rhinestone drag queens posing in the headlights. The cab edged forward, parting the throng like a river, carrying Suko to whatever strange shores of pleasure still lay ahead of him this night.

'Where did you say you were from?' the man asked. As Suko answered, gentle fingers did something exciting to the inside of his thigh, through his ripped black jeans. The blond man's voice was without accent, almost without inflection.

Of course, no one in LA had an accent. Everyone was from somewhere else, but they all strove to hide it, as if they'd slid from the womb craving flavoured mineral water and sushi on Melrose. But Suko had met no one else who spoke like this man. His voice was soft and low, nearly a monotone. To Suko it was soothing; any kind of

quiet aimed at him was soothing after the circuses of Patpong and Sunset Boulevard, half a world apart but cut from the same bright cacophonous cloth. Cities of angels: *yeah, right.* Fallen angels.

They pulled up in front of a shabby apartment building that looked as if it had been modelled after a cardboard box some time in the 1950s. The man — *Justin,* Suko remembered, his name was *Justin* — paid the cab driver but didn't tip. The cab gunned away from the curb, tires squealing rudely on the cracked asphalt. Justin stumbled backwards and bumped into Suko. 'Sorry.'

'Hey, no problem.' That was still a mouthful — his tongue just naturally wanted to rattle off a *mai pen rai* — but Suko got all the syllables out. Justin smiled, the first time he'd done so since introducing himself. His long skinny fingers closed around Suko's wrist.

'Come on,' he said. 'It's safer if we go in the back way.'

They walked around the corner of the building, under an iron stairwell and past some garbage cans that fairly shimmered with the odour of decay. Suko's foot hit something soft. He looked down, stopped, and backed into Justin. A young black man lay among the stinking cans, his head propped at a painful angle against the wall, his legs sprawled wide.

'Is he dead?' Suko clutched for his Buddha amulet. The man's ghost might still be trapped in this mean alley, looking for living humans to plague. If it wanted to, it could suck out their life essences through their spinal columns like a child sipping soda from a straw.

But Justin shook his head. 'Just drunk. See, there's an empty bottle by his leg.'

'He looks dead.'

Justin prodded the black man's thigh with the toe of his loafer. After a moment, the man stirred. His eyes never opened, but his hands twitched and his mouth gaped wide, chewing at the air.

'See?'Justin tugged at Suko's arm. 'Come on.'

They climbed the metal stairs and entered the building through a fire door wedged open with a flattened Old Milwaukee can. Justin led the way down a hall coloured only by shadow and grime, stopped in front of a door identical to all the others but for the number 21 stamped on a metal plate small as an egg, and undid a complicated series of locks. He opened the door a crack and ushered Suko inside, then followed and turned to do up all the locks again.

At once Suko noticed the smell. First there was only the most delicate tendril, like a pale brown finger tickling the back of his throat; then a wave hit him, powerful and nauseating. It was the smell of the garbage cans downstairs, increased a hundredfold and overlaid with other smells: cooking oil, air freshener, some caustic chemical

odour that stung his nostrils. It was the smell of rot. And it filled the apartment.

Justin saw Suko wrinkling his nose. 'My refrigerator broke,' he said. 'Damn landlord says he can't replace it till next week. I just bought a bunch of meat on sale and it all went bad. Don't look in the fridge, whatever you do.'

'Why you don't—' Suko caught himself. 'Why *don't you* throw it out?'

'Oh. ' Justin looked vaguely surprised for a moment. Then he shrugged. 'I'll get around to it, I guess. It doesn't bother me much.'

He pulled a bottle of rum from somewhere, poured a few inches into a glass already sitting on the countertop and stirred in a spoonful of sugar. Justin had been impressed by Suko's taste for straight sugared rum back at the Stag, and said he had some expensive Bacardi he wanted Suko to try. Their fingertips kissed as the glass changed hands, and a tiny thrill ran down Suko's spine. Justin was a little weird, but Suko could handle that, no problem. And there was a definite sexual charge between them. Suko felt sure the rest of the night would swarm with flavours and sensations, fireworks and roses.

Justin watched Suko sip the rum. His eyes were an odd, deep lilac-blue, a colour Suko had never seen before in the endless spectrum of American eyes. The liquor tasted faintly bitter beneath the sugar, as if the glass weren't quite clean. Again, Suko could deal; a clean glass at the Hi-Way Bar on Patpong 3 was a rare find.

'Do you want to smoke some weed?' Justin asked when Suko had polished off an inch of the Bacardi.

'Sure.'

'It's in the bedroom.' Suko was ready to follow him there, but Justin said, 'I'll get it,' and hurried out of the kitchen. Suko heard him banging about in the other room, opening and shutting a great many drawers.

Suko drank more rum. He glanced sideways at the refrigerator, a modern monolith of shining harvest gold, without the cosy clutter he had seen decorating the fridges of others: memo boards, shopping lists, food-shaped magnets trapping snapshots or newspaper cartoons. It gave off a nearly imperceptible hum, the sound of a motor running smoothly. And the smell of decay seemed to emanate from all around the apartment, not just the fridge. Could it really be broken?

He grabbed the door handle and tugged. The seal sucked softly back for a second; then the door swung wide and the refrigerator light clicked on.

A fresh wave of rot washed over him. Maybe Justin hadn't been lying about meat gone bad. The contents of the fridge were meagre and depressing: a decimated twelve-pack of cheap beer, a crusted jar

of Gulden's Spicy Brown mustard, several lumpy packages wrapped in foil. A residue of rusty red on the bottom shelf, like the juice that might leak out of a meat tray. And pushed far to the back, a large Tupperware cake server, incongruous among the slim bachelor pickings.

Suko touched one of the beer cans. It was icy cold.

Something inside the cake server was moving. He could just make out its faint shadowy convulsions through the opaque plastic.

Suko slammed the door and stumbled away. Justin was just coming back in. He gripped Suko's arms, stared into his face. 'What's wrong?'

'Nothing — I—'

'Did you open the fridge?'

'No!'

Justin shook him. The strange lilac eyes had gone muddy, the handsome features twisted into a mean mask. *'Did you open the fucking fridge}'* Suko felt droplets of spit land on his face, his lips. He wished miserably that they could have got there some other way, any way but this. He had wanted to make love with this man.

'Did you—'

'No!!!'

Suko thought he might cry. At the same time he had begun to feel remote, far away from the ugly scene, as if he were floating in a corner watching it but not caring much what happened. It must be the rum. But it wasn't like being drunk; that was a familiar feeling. This was more like the time Noy had convinced him to take two Valiums. An hour after swallowing the little yellow wafers, Suko had watched Noy suck him off from a million miles away, wondering why anyone ever got excited about this, why anyone ever got excited about anything.

He had hated the feeling then. He hated it more now, because it was pulling him down.

He was afraid it might be the last thing he ever felt.

He was afraid it might not be.

Justin half-dragged, half-carried Suko into the bedroom and dumped him on the mattress. He felt the boy's delicate ivory bones shifting under his hands, the boy's exquisite mass of organs pressing against his groin. He wanted to unzip that sweet sack of skin right now, sink his teeth into that beating, bleeding heart. but no. He had other plans for this one.

He'd closed the door to the adjacent bathroom in case he brought the boy in here still conscious. Most of a body was soaking in a tub full of icewater and Clorox. Suko wouldn't have needed to see that.

Justin almost opened the door for the extra light, but decided not to. He didn't want to leave the bedside even for a second.

His supplies were ready on the nightstand. Justin plugged the drill's power cord into the socket behind the bed, gently thumbed up one of Suko's make-up-smudged eyelids and examined the silvery sclera. The sleeping pills had worked fine, as always. He ground them up and put them in a glass before he left. That way, when he brought home company, Justin could simply pour him a drink in the special glass.

He used the scissors to slice off Suko's shirt, which was so artfully ripped up that Justin hardly had to damage it further to remove it. He cut away the beads and amulets, saving the tiny wooden penis, which had caught his eye back at the Stag. His own penis ached and burned. He pressed his ear against the narrow chest, heard the lungs pull in a deep slow breath, then release it just as easily. He heard blood moving unhurried through arteries and veins, heard a secret stomach sound from down below. Justin could listen to a boy's chest and stomach all night, but reluctantly he took his ear away.

He crawled on to the bed, positioned Suko's head in his lap, and hefted the drill, which was heavier than he remembered. He hoped he would be able to control how far the bit went in. A fraction of an inch too deep into the brain could ruin everything. It was only the frontal lobes he wanted to penetrate, the cradle of free will.

Justin parted the boy's thick black hair and placed the diamond-tipped bit against the centre of the pale, faintly shiny scalp. He took a deep breath, bit his lip, and squeezed the trigger. When he took the drill away, there was a tiny, perfect black hole near the crown of the boy's head.

He picked up the syringe, slid the needle in and forward, towards the forehead. He felt a tiny resistance, as if the needle was passing through a hair-thin elastic membrane. He pushed the plunger and flooded the boy's brain with chlorine bleach.

Three things happened at once.

Suko's eyes fluttered open.

Justin had an explosive orgasm in his pants.

Something heavy thudded against the bathroom door.

Suko saw the blond man's face upside down, the lilac eyes like little slices of moon, the mouth a reverse smile or grimace. A whining buzz filled his skull, seemed to jar the very plates of his skull, as if hornets had built a nest inside his brain. A dull ache spread spiderlike over the top of his head.

He smelled roses, though he had seen none in the room. He smelled wood shavings, the sharp stink of shit, the perfume of ripe

oranges. Each of these scents was gone as quickly as it had come. Lingering was a burnt metallic flavour, a little like the taste that had lingered in his mouth the time he'd had a tooth filled in Bangkok.

Shavings. Roses. Cut grass. Sour milk. And underneath it all, the smell of rotting flesh.

Suko's field of vision went solid screaming chartreuse, then danger red. Now Justin was back, a negative of himself, hair green, face inky purple, eyes white circles with pinholes at their centres like tiny imploding suns. And suddenly something else was in the frame as well. Something all black, with holes where no holes should be. A face swollen and torn, a face that could not be alive, but whose jaw was moving.

A hand missing most of its fingers closed on the back of Justin's hair and yanked. A drooling purple mouth closed on Justin's pale throat and tore away a chunk.

Suko managed to sit up. His vision spun and yawed. The reek of rot was dizzying, and overlaying it was a new stinging smell, a chemical smell he could not identify. Something salty ran into his eyes. He touched his face, and his fingers came away slicked with a thin clear substance.

The thing wrapped skeletal arms around Justin and pulled him off the bed. They rolled on the floor together, Justin's blood fountaining out of his throat, the thing grunting and lapping at it. Ragged flesh trailed from its mouth.

Justin wasn't screaming, Suko realized.

He was *smiling.*

It was the boy from the bathtub. Justin couldn't see his face, but he could smell the Clorox, raw and fresh. He had carved a great deal of flesh off of this one, as well as removing the viscera. But he had not yet cut off the head. Now it was snuggled under his chin, tongue burrowing like a worm into his wounded throat. He felt the teeth tearing at him, chunks of his skin and muscle disappearing down the boy's gullet. He felt one of the bones in his neck crack and splinter.

The pain was as shocking as an orgasm, but cleaner. The joy was like nothing he had known before, not when he watched his mother die, not when he tasted the flesh of another person for the first time. It had worked. Not only was the Asian boy still alive, but the others had come back as well. They had never left Justin at all. They had only been waiting.

He got his arms around the hollow body, pulled it closer. He cupped the cold rubbery buttocks, entwined his legs with the thrusting bones of its thighs. When its jaws released his throat, he pressed his face against the voracious swollen one, pushed his tongue between the

blackened lips and felt the teeth rip it out. His mouth filled with blood and rot. He swallowed, gagged, swallowed again.

A head rolled out from under the bed, pushing itself by frantic motions of jaw and tongue. The severed ends of the neck muscles twitched, trying to help it along. Its nose and left eyebrow were pierced with silver rings, its empty eyesockets crusted with blood and greasy black make-up. It reached Justin and bit deep into one of his thighs. He kicked once, in surprise, then bent his leg so that the teeth could more easily get at the soft muscle of his groin. He felt his flesh peeling away.

The upper half of a body was pulling itself out of the closet. Its black-lacquered nails dug into the carpet. Ropes of intestine trailed behind it, coming apart, leaving a trail of shit and ichor on the rug. This one had been, possibly, a Mexican boy. Now its skin was the colour of decaying eggplant, and very few teeth were left in its gaping mouth. Dimly Justin remembered extracting them with a pair of pliers after the rigor mortis had slackened.

It tore Justin's belly open with its hands and sank its face into his guts. He arched his back, felt its fingers plunging I deep, its mouth lapping at the very core of him.

The small pleasures of his life — reading, listening to the music of another time, choking the life out of boys and playing with their abandoned shells — were nothing compared to this. He wanted it to go on for ever.

But, eventually, he died.

The corpse from the bathtub chewed at Justin's throat and chest. Half-chewed pieces of Justin slid down its gullet, into the great scooped-out hollow of its abdomen, out on to the floor. The corpse from the closet sucked up the liquor and partly digested meat it found in Justin's stomach.

The head bit into Justin's scrotum and gulped the savoury mass of the testicles like a pair of tender oysters.

They seemed to know when to stop feeding, to refrain from pulling him completely apart, to leave enough of him. When he came back, Justin knew exactly what to do.

After all, he had been doing it long before most of the others.

Suko stumbled out of the bedroom and slammed the door behind him. Something was rolling around and around in the refrigerator, banging against the inside of the door. He almost went over to open it, only caught himself at the last second. He wasn't thinking very clearly. His head felt wrong somehow, his brain caught in a downward spiral. He did not understand what he had just seen. But he knew he had to get out of the apartment.

No problem, a voice yammered in his head. *Stay cool. Chill out. Don't have a cow, man.* He barely knew the meaning of the words. The American voice seemed to be receding down a long black tunnel; already it was so tiny and faint he could hardly hear it. He realized he was thinking in Thai for the first time in years. Even his native language was strange, a flurry of quick sharp syllables like little whirling razorblades slicing into the meat of his brain.

He fumbled with the complicated series of locks, yanked the door open and nearly fell into the hall. How had he entered the building?. Up a metal staircase, through a door at the end of the long dark hall. He reached it and let himself out. The hot October night seared his lungs. He could smell every poisonous particle of exhaust blanketing the city, every atom of shit and filth and blood baked on to the streets. Not like the ripe wet kiss of Bangkok, but so arid, so mercilessly dry. He felt his way down the fire escape and around the corner of the building.

The empty street seemed a mile wide. There was no sidewalk, only a steep curb and a long grey boulevard stretching away towards some other part of the city. There were no cars; he could hear no traffic anywhere. Even with his head feeling so strange, Suko knew something was wrong. LA streets were often empty of people, but always there were cars.

Far away at the next intersection, he made out a small group of figures straggling in his direction, bathed in a traffic light's red glow. For a long moment he watched them come, trying to be sure they were really there, wondering what he should do. Then he started towards them. The blond man had done something awful to his head; he needed help. Maybe the figures would be able to help him.

But when he got closer, he saw that they were like the things he had seen in the bedroom. One had a long fatty slash wound across its bare torso. One had been gouged in the face with something jagged; its nose was cleaved in half and an eyeball hung out of the socket, leaking yolky fluid. One had no wounds, but looked as if it had starved to death; its nude body was all bone-ends and wasted hollows, its genitals shrivelled into the pelvic cavity, its blue-white skin covered with huge black and purple lesions.

When they saw him, the things opened their mouths and widened their nostrils, catching his scent. It was too late to get away. He couldn't run, didn't think he would even be able to stand up much longer. He stumbled forward and gave himself to them.

The little group closed around Suko, keeping him on his feet, supporting him as best they could. Gouged Eyeball caught him and steadied him. Slash Wound mouthed his shoulder as if in comfort, but did not bite. Lesions nudged him, urged him on. Suko realized they

were *herding* him. They recognized him as one of their own, separated from the flock somehow. They were welcoming him back in.

Miserably, Suko wondered what would happen when they met someone alive.

Then the hunger flared in his belly, and he knew.

* * *

Poppy Z. Brite has worked as an artist's model, a mouse caretaker, a stripper and, since 1991, a full-time writer. Her three novels are *Lost Souls, Drawing Blood* and *Exquisite Corpse*. Short stories and articles have been published in numerous markets, including *Rage, Swamp, The Village Voice, Revelations* (aka *Millennium)* and *The Best New Horror* series. She is the editor of the vampire anthologies *Love In Vein* and *Love in Vein II* and her major biography, *Courtney Love: The Real Story,* was recently published. 'The greatest horror of "Self-Made Man",' reveals the author, 'is that it was written for *Book of the Dead 3,* an anthology that went through a series of delays, scandals, intrigues and near-lawsuits before sinking under the weight of editorial and publishing idiocy. As for the story itself, it was written when I was midway through my novel *Exquisite Corpse,* and I just had to get some of the Jeffrey Dahmer-mania out of my system before I could go on. Readers have said my characters in the novel are too influenced by Dahmer — wait 'til they get a load of this baby.'

The Price
NEIL GAIMAN

Tramps and vagabonds have marks they make on gateposts and trees and doors, letting others of their kind know a little about the people who live at the houses and farms they pass on their travels. I think cats must leave similar signs; how else to explain the cats who turn up at our door through the year, hungry and flea-ridden and abandoned?

We take them in. We get rid of the fleas and the ticks, feed them and take them to the vet. We pay for them to get their shots, and, indignity upon indignity, we have them neutered or spayed.

And they stay with us, for a few months, or for a year, or for ever.

Most of them arrive in summer. We live in the country, just the right distance out of town for the city-dwellers to abandon their cats near us.

We never seem to have more than eight cats, rarely have less than three. The cat population of my house is currently as follows: Hermione and Pod, tabby and black respectively, the mad sisters who live in my attic office, and do not mingle; Princess, the blue-eyed long-haired white cat, who lived wild in the woods for years before she gave up her wild ways for soft sofas and beds; and, last but largest, Furball, Princess's cushion-like calico long-haired daughter, orange and black and white, whom I discovered as a tiny kitten in our garage one day, strangled and almost dead, her head poked through an old badminton net, and who surprised us all by not dying but instead growing up to be the best-natured cat I have ever encountered.

And then there is the black cat. Who has no other name than the Black Cat, and who turned up almost a month ago. We did not realize he was going to be living here at first: he looked too well-fed to be a stray, too old and jaunty to have been abandoned. He looked like a small panther, and he moved like a patch of night.

One day, in the summer, he was lurking about our ramshackle porch: eight or nine years old, at a guess, male, greenish-yellow of eye, very friendly, quite unperturbable. I assumed he belonged to a neighbouring farmer or household.

I went away for a few weeks, to finish writing a book, and when I came home he was still on our porch, living in an old cat-bed one of the children had found for him. He was, however, almost unrecognizable. Patches of fur had gone, and there were deep scratches on his grey skin. The tip of one ear was chewed away. There was a gash beneath one eye, a slice gone from one lip. He looked tired and thin.

We took the Black Cat to the vet, where we got him some antibiotics, which we fed him each night, along with soft cat food.

We wondered who he was fighting. Princess, our white, beautiful, near-feral queen? Raccoons? A rat-tailed, fanged possum?

Each night the scratches would be worse — one night his side would be chewed-up; the next, it would be his underbelly, raked with claw marks and bloody to the touch.

When it got to that point, I took him down to the basement to recover, beside the furnace and the piles of boxes. He was surprisingly heavy, the Black Cat, and I picked him up and carried him down there, with a cat-basket, and a litter bin, and some food and water. I closed the door behind me. I had to wash the blood from my hands when I left the basement.

He stayed down there for four days. At first he seemed too weak to feed himself: a cut beneath one socket had rendered him almost one-eyed, and he limped and lolled weakly, thick yellow pus oozing from the cut in his lip.

I went down there every morning and every night, and I fed him, and gave him antibiotics, which I mixed with his canned food, and I dabbed at the worst of the cuts, and spoke to him. He had diarrhoea, and, although I changed his litter daily, the basement stank evilly.

The four days that the Black Cat lived in the basement were a bad four days in my house: the baby slipped in the bath, and banged her head, and might have drowned; I learned that a project I had set my heart on — adapting Hope Mirrlees' novel *Lud in the Mist* for the BBC — was no longer going to happen, and I realized that I did not have the energy to begin again from scratch, pitching it to other networks, or to other media; my daughter left for Summer Camp, and immediately began to send home a plethora of heart-tearing letters

and cards, five or six each day, imploring us to take her away; my son had some kind of fight with his best friend, to the point that they were no longer on speaking terms; and returning home one night, my wife hit a deer, which ran out in front of the car. The deer was killed, the car was left undriveable, and my wife sustained a small cut over one eye.

By the fourth day, the cat was prowling the basement, walking haltingly but impatiently between the stacks of books and comics, the boxes of mail and cassettes, of pictures and of gifts and of stuff. He mewed at me to let him out and, reluctantly, I did so.

He went back on to the porch, and slept there for the rest of the day.

The next morning there were deep, new gashes in his flanks, and clumps of black cat-hair — his — covered the wooden boards of the porch.

Letters arrived that day from my daughter, telling us that Camp was going better, and she thought she could survive a few days; my son and his friend sorted out their problem, although what the argument was about — trading cards, computer games, *Star Wars* or A Girl — I would never learn. The BBC Executive who had vetoed *Lud in the Mist* was discovered to have been taking bribes (well, 'questionable loans') from an independent production company, and was sent home on permanent leave: his successor, I was delighted to learn, when she faxed me, was the woman who had initially proposed the project to me before leaving the BBC.

I thought about returning the Black Cat to the basement, but decided against it. Instead, I resolved to try and discover what kind of animal was coming to our house each night, and from there to formulate a plan of action — to trap it, perhaps.

For birthdays and at Christmas my family gives me gadgets and gizmos, pricy toys which excite my fancy but, ultimately, rarely leave their boxes. There is a food dehydrator and an electric carving knife, a bread-making machine, and, last year's present, a pair of see-in-the-dark binoculars. On Christmas Day I had put the batteries into the binoculars, and had walked about the basement in the dark, too impatient even to wait until nightfall, stalking a flock of imaginary starlings. (You were warned not to turn it on in the light: that would have damaged the binoculars, and quite possibly your eyes as well.)

Afterwards I had put the device back into its box, and it sat there still, in my office, beside the box of computer cables and forgotten bits and pieces.

Perhaps, I thought, if the creature, dog or cat or raccoon or what-have-you, were to see me sitting on the porch, it would not come, so I took a chair into the box-and-coat-room, little larger than a closet, which overlooks the porch, and, when everyone in the house was asleep, I went out on to the porch, and bade the Black Cat goodnight.

That cat, my wife had said, when he first arrived, is a person. And there was something very person-like in his huge, leonine face: his broad black nose, his greenish-yellow eyes, his fanged but amiable mouth (still leaking amber pus from the right lower lip).

I stroked his head, and scratched him beneath the chin, and wished him well. Then I went inside, and turned off the light on the porch.

I sat on my chair, in the darkness inside the house, with the see-in-the-dark binoculars on my lap. I had switched the binoculars on, and a trickle of greenish light came from the eyepieces.

Time passed, in the darkness.

I experimented with looking at the darkness with the binoculars, learning to focus, to see the world in shades of green. I found myself horrified by the number of swarming insects I could see in the night air: it was as if the night world were some kind of nightmarish soup, swimming with life. Then I lowered the binoculars from my eyes and stared out at the rich blacks and blues of the night, empty and peaceful and calm.

Time passed. I struggled to keep awake, found myself profoundly missing cigarettes and coffee, my two lost addictions. Either of them would have kept my eyes open. But before I had tumbled too far into the world of sleep and dreams a yowl from the garden jerked me fully awake. I fumbled the binoculars to my eyes, and was disappointed to see that it was merely Princess, the white cat, streaking across the front garden like a patch of greenish-white light. She vanished into the woodland to the left of the house, and was gone.

I was about to settle myself back down when it occurred to me to wonder what exactly had startled Princess so, and I began scanning

the middle distance with the binoculars, looking for a huge raccoon, a dog, or a vicious possum. And there was indeed something coming down the driveway, towards the house. I could see it through the binoculars, clear as day.

It was the Devil.

I had never seen the Devil before, and, although I had written about him in the past, if pressed, would have confessed that I had no belief in him, other than as an imaginary figure, tragic and Miltonian. The figure coming up the driveway was not Milton's Lucifer. It was the Devil.

My heart began to pound in my chest, to pound so hard that it hurt. I hoped it could not see me, that, in a dark house, behind window-glass, I was hidden.

The figure flickered and changed as it walked up the drive. One moment it was dark, bull-like, Minotaurish, the next it was slim and female, and the next it was a cat itself, a scarred, huge grey-green wildcat, its face contorted with hate.

There are steps that lead up to my porch, four white wooden steps in need of a coat of paint (I knew they were white, although they were, like everything else, green through my binoculars). At the bottom of the steps, the Devil stopped, and called out something that I could not understand, three, perhaps four words in a whining, howling language that must have been old and forgotten when Babylon was young; and, although I did not understand the words, I felt the hairs rise on the back of my head as it called.

And then I heard, muffled through the glass, but still audible, a low growl, a challenge, and, slowly, unsteadily, a black figure walked down the steps of the house, away from me, towards the Devil. These days the Black Cat no longer moved like a panther; instead he stumbled and rocked, like a sailor only recently returned to land.

The Devil was a woman now. She said something soothing and gentle to the cat, in a tongue that sounded like French, and reached out a hand to him. He sank his teeth into her arm, and her lip curled and she spat at him.

The woman glanced up at me then, and if I had doubted that she was the Devil before, I was certain of it now: the woman's eyes flashed

red fire at me; but you can see no red through the night-vision binoculars, only shades of green. And the Devil saw me, through the window. It saw me. I am in no doubt about that at all.

The Devil twisted and writhed, and now it was some kind of jackal, a flat-faced, huge-headed, bull-necked creature, halfway between a hyena and a dingo. There were maggots squirming in its mangy fur, and it began to walk up the steps.

The Black Cat leapt upon it, and in seconds they became a rolling, writhing thing, moving faster than my eyes could follow.

All this in silence.

And then a low roar — down the country road at the bottom of our drive, in the distance, lumbered a late-night truck, its blazing headlights burning bright as green suns through the binoculars. I lowered them from my eyes, and saw only darkness, and the gentle yellow of headlights, and then the red of rear lights as it vanished off again into the nowhere at all.

When I raised the binoculars once more there was nothing to be seen. Only the Black Cat, on the steps, staring up into the air. I trained the binoculars up, and saw something flying away — a vulture, perhaps, or an eagle — and then it flew beyond the trees and was gone.

I went out on to the porch, and picked up the Black Cat, and stroked him, and said kind, soothing things to him. He mewled piteously when I first approached him, but, after a while, he went to sleep on my lap, and I put him into his basket, and went upstairs to my bed, to sleep myself. There was dried blood on my T-shirt and jeans the following morning.

That was a week ago.

The thing that comes to my house does not come every night. But it comes most nights: we know it by the wounds on the cat, and the pain I can see in those leonine eyes. He has lost the use of his front left paw, and his right eye has closed for good.

I wonder what we did to deserve the Black Cat. I wonder who sent him. And, selfish and scared, I wonder how much more he has to give.

* * *

Neil Gaiman is one of the most acclaimed comics writers of his generation, most notably for his epic World Fantasy Award-winning *Sandman* series, *Death: The High Cost of Living* and *The Books of Magic*. His books include *The Official Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy Companion, Good Omens* (with Terry Pratchett), *Ghastly Beyond Belief* (with Kim Newman), *Now We Are Sick* (with Stephen Jones), *The Sandman Book of Dreams* (edited with Ed Kramer), and various graphic novel collaborations with artist Dave McKean: *Black Orchid, Violent Cases, Signal to Noise, Mr Punch* and, most recently, *The Day I Swapped My Dad for Two Goldfish. Angels & Visitations* is a bestselling collection of his short fiction, while his novel *Neverwhere* is based on the BBC TV series he created. 'There is nothing really I can add to this story,' says the author. 'The number of cats living with us continues to go up and down. Yesterday, for the first time, a stray dog arrived, a chocolate-brown Labrador, very friendly and enthusiastic, loving to anyone who isn't a cat. He's already demolished two doors trying to get into the house and love us and protect us from the feline menace. I hope we can find a home for him soon. We're running out of doors.'

Such a Nice Girl
STORM CONSTANTINE

The residents of Willowdale Farm Estate were united in the opinion that Emma Tizard was *such* a nice girl. Nothing bad could possibly have happened to her because she was so sensible. She never walked out at night alone, never invited strangers beyond her security chain and would never, ever *dream* of stopping her smart new car on a deserted stretch of road at night. Her mysterious disappearance must have some straightforward explanation.

The first time anyone got to know Emma was actually missing was when her employer, Michael Homey, knocked on Cynthia Peeling's door that Tuesday morning. Mrs Peeling lived in the bungalow next to Emma's. Cynthia belonged to that breed of women whose hair became blonder as they grew older, whose clothes became more youthful, and who got away with it because of sheer panache. Michael explained that Emma hadn't turned up for work the day before, hadn't telephoned to give an explanation — which she always did if she was ill — and was still absent today.

'It really isn't like her,' he said apologetically. 'That's why I felt I ought to come round. I know she lives alone and wondered, well, if she'd had an accident. There doesn't seem to be anyone at home. '

Although Cynthia could hardly claim to be an intimate of Emma's, she knew the girl sometimes disappeared for days at a time. Usually, she popped over to ask Cynthia to keep an eye on the bungalow for her, never giving any explanation for her absence, other than a bright remark such as, 'Time to recharge my batteries!' This made Cynthia think of open spaces, sporty pursuits. Emma always looked so healthy, and gave the impression she could look after herself more than adequately. Therefore, Cynthia was not that perturbed by Michael Homey's worrying. She invited him in for coffee and Viennese fingers, in the hope of calming his fears. He refused to be convinced by Cynthia's gentle arguments.

'We should check she isn't lying unconscious in the house,' he said. 'I would never forgive myself if something'd happened to her, and I'd done nothing to help.'

Peering through the spotless windows of Wren's Nest, they were joined by elderly Mr Godleigh from number 10 and young Mrs Treen with her toddler, Danny, from number 15. Everyone tried the windows, which were all sensibly locked from inside. The bungalow looked immaculate, not a cushion out of place, not a single item of

crockery left on the kitchen drainer. In the bedroom, the pale grey duvet was undented and there were no clothes lying around. Admittedly, they couldn't see into the bathroom, and curtains were drawn over one of the frosted windows. Through the garage door, the red gleam of Emma's car could be seen. 'Do you think we should break in?' Lily Treen suggested.

'That's against the law,' Mr Godleigh said. 'Perhaps we should call the police.'

'Oh, I don't think that's necessary,' Cynthia responded hurriedly, visualizing Emma's alarm should she turn up again. She really didn't feel that Emma was inside but didn't want to say so, not having any proper foundation for her feelings. 'There's bound to be a good reason why she's not here. She might have caught a train to visit relatives, got a cab to the station. Do you know any of her family, Mr Homey?'

Michael Homey shook his head. 'Perhaps Mr Godleigh is right,' he said. 'It's better to be safe than sorry.'

'I think we should wait until tomorrow,' Cynthia insisted, and her tone of voice brooked no argument. 'Emma is a respectable young woman. I don't think we should have policemen breaking her windows just yet.'

At five past six that evening, a long ring on the doorbell disturbed the Peelings from their salad and quiche. Cynthia opened the door to a rather sinister-looking couple, who turned out to be detectives. They asked if the Peelings had a spare key to Wren's Nest, as Emma Tizard's parents thought they might.

Taken aback, Cynthia shook her head. Was anything wrong? Her guts, ahead of the subsequent information, began to churn. She could see two police cars parked at the kerb: uniformed officers were looking in through the windows of the bungalow next door.

Emma Tizard was dead. Her body had been discovered by children playing truant from school. It appeared she'd been brutally murdered, horribly mutilated as if with mindless fury.

If the police found any evidence in Wren's Nest, they presumably removed it from the property. As the last car pulled away, the two plain-clothed detectives came back to interview the Peelings. Cynthia felt utterly sick, guilty for not having suspected something was wrong after all, and confused as to why her instincts hadn't alerted her.

'Did Miss Tizard tell you what she was planning to do over the weekend?'

Cynthia shook her head. 'No. We weren't that close.'

The male detective made a swift note on his pad.

The body had been found still clutching a handbag. The authorities had had no difficulty discovering who Emma was. 'And

you never met any of her friends?'

Cynthia uttered a brittle laugh. She was still deeply shocked. 'No, no. None of us in Cherrytree Lane know much about Emma at all.'

'So you don't know what kind of interests she had?' The female detective seemed to conceal an unpleasant implication in the words.

'Art,' Cynthia said, 'History too. She borrowed books from me once, well, from my son. Ancient history.'

'She never mentioned anything a little more…*unusual?*

'What kind of *unusual?'* Cynthia didn't like the tone of the question.

The female detective shrugged. 'Well, anything to do with the occult.'

Cynthia had to laugh. 'What? Emma? Certainly not. She was a very down-to-earth person. What are you trying to say?'

The male detective cleared his throat. 'Certain items in the house suggest she had an interest in that sort of thing. Books and so on. '

'She must have used them for her art,' Cynthia said lamely. She could think of no other explanation. Emma had been such a nice, ordinary girl.

The detectives wanted to know when Emma had last been seen. Cynthia couldn't clearly remember, but thought it was before the weekend. 'She used to paint and draw a lot. Sometimes we'd never see her at weekends. She used to work then, you see. She worked very hard.' Cynthia felt tears come to her eyes, remembering the water-colour that hung above her bed, a haunting scene, painted by Emma. Soft Emma, gentle Emma; a quiet, artistic soul.

'And there was never any mention of the time she lived in the city?' The female detective's voice had taken on a softer note as she registered Cynthia's distress.

Cynthia shook her head. 'No.'

'It may just be a coincidence.' The male detective carefully re-capped his pen. 'But the young lady Miss Tizard used to share a flat with in London disappeared under strange circumstances too. Unfortunately no trace of her was ever found. Are you completely sure Miss Tizard never mentioned this to you?'

'Quite, sure.' Cynthia collected herself, straightened her spine. 'How dreadful. Do you suppose the same person.?' She shuddered eloquently, pressing a handkerchief to her lips.

The female detective shrugged. 'It was several years ago. Perhaps, as my colleague said, a coincidence.'

Numbed and troubled by this ghastly event in her life, Cynthia Peeling started sleeping badly. She had horrifying and revolting dreams, which left a sour taste in her mouth, but the details of which

she had difficulty recalling. The only one she could remember was that in which she had witnessed a coarse and brazen Emma Tizard violently making love with Mr Peeling. To make it worse, Cynthia had enjoyed the dream. Her waking self found sex rather ridiculous and unnecessarily messy. Rodney Peeling had been puzzled by the peculiar looks his wife had given him over breakfast on Thursday morning.

The police could not solve the mystery of Emma's death. During the next week, television reconstructions of Emma's supposed last movements, and flashes of telephone numbers which people could contact to give information served only to remind Cynthia of the grotesque horror of her neighbour's murder. The tabloid press found out about the occult angle, and lurid headlines suggested the dead girl's involvement in Satanism, inferring she had been the victim of a ritual killing. Everyone on the estate who had known Emma agreed that the occult stories were rubbish.

The day of the funeral dawned unexpectedly dull and overcast, after a week of sunshine. A sizeable group of Willowdale Farm residents gathered in cars around Wren's Nest to escort the funeral cortege to the crematorium. Emma's mother and father, who introduced themselves as Ruby and Steven, had arrived the night before. Ruby Tizard was a frumpy sparrow of a creature who wore grandmotherly hats. The Peelings had kindly offered them accommodation for the night, because Mrs Tizard was obviously too upset to spend it in her dead daughter's bed, the only one available in Wren's Nest. The Tizards were strangely reluctant to enter the bungalow at all. Cynthia supposed that was because of their grief, and was sorry she couldn't offer them more comfort. She wondered whether she should comment on the newspaper stories, and make it clear how wrong they were, but decided it was too soon to broach such an intimate subject.

To make things worse, the funeral, which should have been a dignified occasion, was fraught with minor mishaps and irritations. The minister whom the Tizards had especially wanted to lead the service telephoned at the last minute to tell them with unctuous apology that a family emergency prevented him travelling south. A quick replacement from the local church proved unsatisfactory, since the man knew nothing of Emma, save what he'd read in the papers, which didn't give him much scope for a moving, personal sermon. As he swayed before the congregation, singing the praises of a girl he'd never met, the lights in the chapel flickered, threatening a total failure that never quite happened and the public address system, which should have carried his voice to the furthest ear, spluttered and buzzed, reducing the earnest tones to a wobbling fart. Halfway

through the service, Lily Treen's young son began to scream inexplicably. When Lily took him into the hall outside, he threw up with gusto on to the marble tiles. Everybody must have heard. Mrs Tizard began to cry. Afterwards, when questioned and consequently disbelieved, the child gabbled incoherently about a nasty lady who had put out her tongue at him. From what the adults could gather, the tongue had been black

The following morning, Cynthia Peeling offered to accompany the Tizards to Wren's Nest to look over Emma's belongings, so they could decide what they wanted to keep once the police had finished with everything. Cynthia thought this was the most forlorn and depressing of post mortem tasks.

Mr Tizard opened the front door of Wren's Nest and the three of them shuffled inside. This was only the third time Cynthia had ever set foot in the place. Emma had often popped over to share a quick coffee with her neighbour, especially in the summer, but reciprocal invitations had been non-existent. It certainly couldn't have been because Emma was ashamed of her home. The walls were papered in the most modern, expensive prints that money could buy and the furnishings bore the stamp of a top interior design house.

'What a peculiar smell!' Mr Tizard exclaimed as he went into the lounge. Cynthia Peeling followed him and sniffed.

'What is it?' queried Emma's mother querulously from the hall.

'Nothing alarming!' Cynthia was conscious of her voice being too loud and jolly. 'Some kind of perfume. A bit stale, that's all. The windows have been closed.' The smell was strange. It caught at the back of the throat, half pleasant, half noxious. Had Emma Tizard been burning incense of some kind? Cynthia firmly dismissed a rising sense of unease.

'She was such a tidy girl,' Mrs Tizard said, standing pathetically in the doorway, holding her handbag in front of her. The place didn't look lived in. No ornaments, no books, no magazines, no sense at all of occupation.

It looks like a show home, Cynthia thought. She examined the gleaming hi-fi system and television. It appeared they had never been used.

'I don't think she lived in this room much,' Cynthia said.

Moving close together, the three of them advanced into the dining-room. Here, the same clinical tidiness prevailed. In a drawer, Mr Tizard discovered a stainless steel cutlery set still wrapped in plastic. 'Emma didn't entertain much, it seems,' he said.

'No, she never brought friends home, not that we saw,' Cynthia Peeling said. She eased herself past the Tizards and went quickly

through the dove grey and pale lemon kitchen that bristled with factory-new appliances. ‘Perhaps we’ll find more sense of her in her workroom.’

When Cynthia opened the door to Emma’s workroom, all three of them uttered shocked sounds. Not because of anything unpleasant exactly, but just because of the contrast between the workroom and the rest of Emma’s home. There was a choking stench of stale cigarette smoke and alcohol. Thick blue velvet curtains were drawn across the window. Cynthia quickly went to open it, craving fresh air. She threw back the curtains. Beyond them, the window was frosted. It was not a big room, perhaps partitioned off from the bathroom. There was barely space for the large, ancient desk under the window and the huge cupboard against the far wall. Bookshelves lined the walls from floor to ceiling, apart from a place opposite the door where a huge, gilt-framed mirror hung. Papers were strewn everywhere; ashtrays overflowed on to elderly coffee-mug rings; an easel stood folded in a corner draped with rags. Empty gaps in the clutter suggested items which had been taken away by the police.

’Yes, well, I certainly think we have a sense of Emma here,’ Mr Tizard said dryly.

‘You think so?’ Cynthia Peeling was not so sure. What they had found here had little link with the girl she’d thought Emma to be. It was so sloppy, almost aggressively so. Books leaned everywhere on the shelves; there were volumes on mysticism, erotica, occultism and a pile of cheap, tawdry novels. Cynthia shook her head. She picked up a small book that had been lying open on the desk. A chapter entitled ‘Higher Levels of Awareness’ had been heavily underlined in places. *‘Polarity disposition. Ritual dissimulation and embodiment.’* It made no sense but still disturbed her, made her skin prickle. Unpleasant thoughts were starting to form and, superstitiously, Cynthia had no wish to think ill of the dead.

Mrs Tizard was collecting up a selection of gin bottles from the floor. Her mouth had become a thin, disapproving line. Cynthia had no wish to speak to her.

‘Well,’ Cynthia said to Mr Tizard, hating the brightness in her voice, ‘it would appear Emma lived mostly in this room. I told you she worked very hard. It’s not really surprising that she allowed the place to get a bit messy.’

Mr Tizard didn’t respond. He had picked up a sheaf of sketches and was impatiently leafing through them. ‘Do you know this man?’ He thrust a sketch into Cynthia’s hands.

‘Er. no. I don’t think so,’ she replied, feeling heat suffuse her face. The subject of the drawing was naked, sporting an undisguised

erection. She dropped the paper quickly on to the desk. Mr Tizard had slumped heavily into the swivel chair in front of the desk. Cynthia empathized with what he must be feeling. She started to tidy the scattered papers into one pile. Apart from reams of illegible notes, there must have been hundreds of sketches and water-colours, many of them depicting the same naked man. Some of his poses were so explicit, Cynthia had to keep averting her eyes while tidying them. She was also distressed to find his face becoming more and more familiar to her. Could it be Michael Homey? No, of course not, and yet she'd seen no other man with whom Emma had had any connection. Apart from these disturbingly erotic sketches, there were also many water-colours similar to the one Emma had given to Cynthia; strange, unearthly landscapes in flowing, muted colours; ethereal beings floating in clouds that looked like palaces. Holding them up one by one, Cynthia was tempted to keep some of these for herself. Emma Tizard had been unbelievably talented. Then Cynthia came upon a series of violent, horrifying scenes, where grinning demonic shapes inflicted torture on bodies that spouted blood, and in some cases, entrails. She glanced through them with horrified fascination. No one had spoken in the room for several minutes. Mrs Tizard opened the cupboard. She uttered a dismal squeak and Cynthia turned round.

'What is it?'

'I… I don't know. Not really.' The door swung back and forth. A yellowed skull, perhaps of a ram or goat, was the first thing to catch Cynthia's eye. Everything else in the cupboard looked as if it belonged to a mediaeval apothecary. There were jars of roots and powders, an ornate, spired incense burner (that explained the smell), curly-handled knives, an abundance of other strange paraphernalia. A bizarre diagram, surrounded by what appeared to be foreign words, was scrawled in chalk on the back of the cupboard. 'Why?' Mrs Tizard said, weakly. 'Why?'

Mr Tizard led her quickly from the house.

In the comfort of Cynthia's front room, Mrs Tizard announced that as soon as the police had finished with her daughter's belongings, she wanted the lot burned. There was nothing of Emma there that she wished to keep. To lose a daughter under such awful circumstances was bad enough, but to discover she had some kind of weird *alter ego* was even worse. Cynthia was now convinced that sweet, innocent Emma had become unwittingly involved with unsavoury characters, who had undoubtedly been instrumental in her death. An ingrained sense of decency, along with her superstitious dread, made her feel that no one but the three of them should ever know exactly what had been found in Wren's Nest. Let it be burned and forgotten. Nobody could do anything about it now.

Some weeks later, after the inquest had taken place, and press interest had died down, Mr Tizard came down alone to see to the disposal of Emma's belongings. The police had come up with no further leads, and it seemed the murder would remain a mystery for ever. The Tizards had put Wren's Nest on the market. Obeying, or agreeing with, his wife's desires, Mr Tizard packed everything, including Emma's smart, expensive clothes, into plastic bin liners. Cynthia Peeling drove him in her estate car up to the borough dump and disposed of the lot. It was late afternoon by the time the job was finished. Cynthia was in two minds about what they were doing. She couldn't help feeling it was wrong that all Emma's beautiful clothes and the more expensive of her books had been destroyed, yet she must respect the parents' wishes, and part of her could understand why they felt the need to dispose of everything so finally. However, what really went against the grain was throwing all Emma's drawings and paintings into a skip along with other paper rubbish. Whatever the Tizards might think of the subject matter, Emma had been a superb artist and her work deserved to survive her death. For this reason, Cynthia surreptitiously rolled up about two dozen of Emma's paintings and stowed them in her bedroom while Mr Tizard was occupied elsewhere. Why she also pocketed the book that had been lying open on Emma's desk, she didn't consciously examine.

Cynthia was relieved when Mr Tizard told her he was going home that evening. She quickly agreed to keep the keys for Wren's Nest and to show prospective buyers round it. For some reason, Mrs Tizard hadn't wanted to leave them with an estate agent. As she drove him to the station, Cynthia took the opportunity to direct a few more questions at Mr Tizard. They had been forming in her mind all day. She didn't normally like to pry into other people's affairs, but felt she just couldn't exist if her questions weren't answered.

'What was Emma like?' she asked. 'When she was a child, what was she really like?'

'You've lived next door to her for two years,' Mr Tizard answered. 'You've probably seen more of her than we have. She left home at eighteen, went away to college. We only got about two visits a year out of her after that. Sometimes she asked for money, but it was always paid back.'

'But as a child…?'

'She was a very private girl,' Mr Tizard answered. 'Quiet, well-behaved.' There were a few moments' silence. 'I don't think we ever knew her.'

'What about boyfriends? She was such an attractive girl. She must have had boyfriends.'

‘Not that we knew of. Did you ever see her with a man?’

Cynthia shook her head, quickly passing to the next subject, thinking of the drawings they’d seen. ‘And the girl she lived with in London, the one who disappeared, did you know about that?’

‘Emma came home for a couple of days after that. I think she was quite upset. She slept most of the time. Never spoke much about it though.’

Could a parent really know so little of their child?

That night, Cynthia lay awake in bed next to her snoring husband thinking about Emma Tizard. Had it really been Emma who’d lived in that workroom? Cynthia had never seen Emma smoke and she’d always politely refused any alcoholic drinks at the Peelings’. Gin bottles and overflowing ashtrays? It didn’t seem real.

Cynthia tried to sleep. Dream fragments swooped around her, all of Emma. Emma laughing, her long red hair blowing in an angry wind. Emma hunched over her work table, frowning in concentration, one hand plunged into her hair, the other lovingly shading in an outline of male genitalia. And there was Emma, naked, arms raised to the sky, dancing herself to a frenzy beneath a full, pale moon. Now she and Emma were walking arm in arm through a park, Emma chatting girlishly, no longer shy or withdrawn. ‘Of course, it takes so long and there are always errors,’ she was saying, ‘but it doesn’t matter, the result is always the same.’

‘I don’t understand you,’ Cynthia said.

‘Of course you don’t, you’re so fucking normal! Frigid bitch!’ And Emma was laughing at her.

Cynthia woke up, panting. She felt that a noise must have awoken her but could hear nothing. There was a movement in the corner of the room, in the shadows, where Cynthia’s plump, decorative armchair stood; the chair behind which she had stowed Emma’s paintings. Cynthia blinked. Was someone sitting there? A movement, a shift of moonlight. Someone rose, snake-like, from the chair and came towards the bed. It was Emma Tizard herself! The witch Emma, the secret Emma, and possibly a vengeful Emma. Cynthia could make no sound. She couldn’t see Emma’s face, but the hair was unmistakable, not bound, not plaited, but loose and glorious in the half-light. The figure moved to the dressing table and picked up the photograph of Cynthia’s son, Richard. Cynthia saw the pale flesh, the long fingers, the perfect unvarnished nails. Emma looked at the photograph and chuckled. She turned to Cynthia. ‘What a white little worm. Bet he’s a lousy fuck,’ she said.

Cynthia Peeling could not scream, but her muffled, petrified squeaks woke her husband. He turned on the bedside light. ‘Cyn,

what's the matter love?' He shook her. 'Wake up! Cyn!' She opened her eyes puffing and gasping, as if she'd been drowning. The bottom sheet had come untucked and had wrapped itself around her hot legs.

'She!' Cynthia gasped, unable to say the name. 'The dead girl from next door. My God, Rod, she was here!'

Rodney put a comforting hand on his wife's shoulder. 'Come on, love, bad dream, that's all.' He made soothing noises and arranged the pillows under her head. 'Get back to sleep. You'll soon forget.'

Cynthia felt her breathing slow down. She closed her eyes. No one could ever have called her an imaginative person. She did not believe in ghosts and thought witchcraft was an excuse for bizarre sexual practices, but if her husband had known what was going through her head at that moment, he would have thought her a stranger.

Next morning, once Rodney had gone to work, Cynthia had to go into the lounge and draw the curtains on the window that overlooked Wren's Nest. She thought with dread of the rolled-up paintings behind her chair in the bedroom, and the little book in her dressing-table drawer. However, by lunch-time, she'd managed to pull herself together and examine rationally the way she was feeling. She drank a glass of milk and made herself a salad sandwich. *It's over now,* she thought, *We will never know what happened to Emma Tizard or find out any of her secrets, but it doesn't matter. I don't want to know.*

Having comforted herself, she went to wash her glass, plate and knife at the sink. Leaves had begun to fall from the apple trees in the garden. The season was changing and the sun looked low in the sky. Cynthia put the radio on to listen to the afternoon play and went to open the curtains in the lounge. *No more of this!* she thought, briskly pulling the drapes apart.

There was a light burning in Wren's Nest. Cynthia's first thought was that the estate agents were showing someone around the place, but that was impossible because she had the only keys. Almost automatically, she slung a jacket over her shoulders and ran out of the house, over the lawn towards Wren's Nest, before she realized what she was doing. She felt sure that someone was in Wren's Nest to whom Emma had already given a key. Cynthia was aware that it could be dangerous to confront whoever it might be, but she couldn't stop herself.

Breathless, she rang the doorbell. Nobody came to answer it, but she felt the presence of someone pausing inside, looking up from what they were doing, waiting. She rang again. Nothing. She thought of the keys hanging up in her kitchen that had come from Emma's handbag. Should she fetch them? Should she go back and call the police? She took a step backwards, hesitating.

The front door to Wren's Nest opened. A tall, pale girl stood there, long blonde hair falling over her face. She wore a dark coat, hanging open. She and Cynthia stared at each other for a moment. Cynthia was unsure of what to say. 'I'm Emma's neighbour,' she said at last, gesturing back towards her house.

The girl frowned. 'Where are her things?' she demanded. 'What have you done with Emma's things?'

Cynthia felt small. 'Well, her parents came. ' she began lamely.

'They had no right!'

'Well, no one else came!' Cynthia said indignantly. 'It's been so long! Was there something of yours Emma had?' She was wondering whether she ought to invite this strange person over for coffee, a natural instinct for hospitality. 'You missed the funeral? I'm sorry. A friend of Emma's were you?'

The girl smiled grimly. 'There's nothing left here,' she said. 'I didn't mean to be so late. I thought I'd be in time.'

'Well. ' Cynthia shrugged awkwardly. 'Would you like a hot drink? It must be cold in there and. the. electricity's. turned. off.' She tried to peer past the girl to see if the lights were on. Perhaps a candle?

The girl considered for a moment, then said, 'Yes please, I would like a drink. I'm Felicia Browning.'

The name seemed familiar to Cynthia. Where had she heard it before?

The girl looked out of place in Cynthia's kitchen, too large somehow, too awkward, yet she was graceful and slim. As Cynthia plugged in the kettle, Felicia Browning said, 'Can you help me get Emma's things?'

Cynthia dared not look at her, fiddling with the on/off switch needlessly. Never a person to lie, she now had the strongest reluctance to confess she'd virtually stolen some of the paintings and the little book. 'Well, I'm afraid that's impossible. You see, Emma's parents took her effects to the dump.' It sounded sordid now, a foul and spiteful act.

'The stupid bastards!' Felicia Browning exclaimed vehemently. 'That was years of work! Years of it!'

'I'm sorry. I'm inclined to agree with you,' Cynthia said, 'But unfortunately Mrs Tizard was adamant. She found some things that quite upset her, you see.'

The girl nodded. 'Yes, Em was careless. She should have cleared things away. She should have told me earlier. Now, it's all gone!'

'What do you mean exactly? Was Emma planning on leaving anyway?'

Felicia looked at Cynthia with an unattractive furtiveness, then shrugged. ‘She was making preparations but the timing didn’t quite work out.’

‘It certainly didn’t!’ Cynthia said cynically. She poured hot water into the coffee mugs. ‘Have you known Emma long?’

‘I suppose so. We used to live together in London.’

Cynthia looked up sharply. Of course, the name! She must have read it in the papers, or had the police mentioned it? Emma’s erstwhile, disappearing flatmate.

Felicia took her mug and sipped, speaking to Cynthia over the rim, confirming her hostess’s suspicions without further prompting. ‘I can see you’ve heard about me. I’ve been away for a while.’

‘Away!’

‘Don’t worry about it!’ Felicia said, laughing.

Cynthia felt herself flush. ‘It’s just that. people had assumed. ’ She gestured helplessly with one hand.

Felicia narrowed her eyes, ignoring Cynthia’s lame comments. ‘Emma was going to join me, fucked everything up, which is why I’m here now. Totally disorganized she is, totally! I’m not sure what I’m even supposed to be looking for here. There’s a communication problem at present.’

Cynthia was beginning to wish this person would go. There was something eerie about her, disturbing. As if reading her mind, the girl stood up.

‘I’ll be off now. Thanks for the coffee.’

‘Would you like to leave an address? If anything should turn up, I could contact you..’ Cynthia offered vaguely.

Felicia laughed. ‘That’s not likely!’ She strode out of the house, leaving the door open.

Cynthia had to sit down and compose herself again. Whatever Emma had been mixed up in, Felicia Browning had been part of it, and she had sat in Cynthia’s kitchen and drunk her coffee! Cynthia quickly picked up the half empty mug and dropped it into the sink, running hot water over it for several minutes. She worried about Felicia having another set of keys to the bungalow. Later, she had better phone the Tizards and tell them. It was their problem, not hers.

Rodney rang to say he would be late home and not to hold dinner. Cynthia ate early, making herself a mixed grill, and drank two glasses of wine. After eating, she went into the bedroom and fetched Emma’s paintings and book. Using ashtrays, mugs and ornaments, she laid the paintings out on the floor and sprawled on the sofa to study them, drinking another glass of wine. She had only taken one study of the naked man, one of the less erotic sketches. Now, it seemed to

stand out from all the rest, commanding her attention. He was quite beautiful, almost effeminate, slim but with a hint of strength within the litheness. The face was disturbingly familiar. *Of course!* Cynthia realized the drawing was reminiscent of Emma herself. Did the Tizards have a son? Cynthia shuddered. Good God, was incest, or at the least the thought of it, another of Emma's dark secrets? No brother had been mentioned though and surely he would have come to the funeral… *if he was alive.* Still glancing at the drawing, she opened the little book and tried to read some of it. A hopeless task really. It was not a work written for the uninitiated and she could barely understand a quarter of it. Was this research for Emma's unearthly paintings, or something darker, more personal? Sighing, Cynthia put the book down. It would not give up its knowledge to her.

The light had faded completely from the sky outside and Cynthia sat in darkness, drinking and staring through the window at Wren's Nest. Her eyes were narrow, her gaze strangely vacant. Her breathing had become shallow and misted on the air. Something nagged at her inside her head; a voice almost heard, but not quite. She felt she knew the answer, had all the pieces to reveal the picture, yet was too close to see it as a whole.

I must go back. It's there. Felicia missed it. I must go back. The compulsion could not be ignored.

Cynthia raised herself jerkily from the sofa and padded into the kitchen. She put on her shoes and her coat and lifted down the keys to Emma's bungalow. From the back of her pantry she took a flashlight down off its hook and marched out of her home, with purpose, to the house next door.

Nothing happened when she tried the light switch in Emma's hallway. For a moment, Cynthia was afraid of the dark, but the fear had to be ignored. Feeling her way along the wall, she went into the lounge. Here, she turned on the flashlight, illuminating the ghostly clouds of her breath. The incense smell had gone. The Tizards had left all the furniture in the house; most of it was brand-new. She herself would not want to sit or sleep in the furniture of the dead.

In the kitchen, all the cupboard doors were open. Felicia Browning must have made a thorough search, but all were empty. Cynthia closed them, took a deep breath, and went out into the hall again, pausing before the workroom door.

It looked much larger now that all Emma's belongings had gone. The desk had been polished, the floor cleaned. Cynthia went inside. There was nothing there. What had she been expecting? Her body gave an involuntary jump, as if responding to a sharp, unheard sound.

What the hell am I doing here? An empty house, there's nothing here. Too much wine? Am I obsessed? You stupid creature, get out of

here! Go home, draw the curtains, put on the lights, watch TV.

But the thoughts were separate from her. She realized she hadn't the will, nor even the desire to move from *the* room. Was she afraid? She felt electrified, apprehensive, somehow out of control. None of these feelings were familiar to Cynthia Peeling.

Opposite her, the ornate mirror on the wall had misted over with condensation. Cynthia pulled herself together with rational, organizing thoughts. Perhaps she should arrange to have the heating turned on. New residents wouldn't want to cope with problems caused by damp. The mere invocation of these mundane ideas seemed to change the atmosphere in the room. Cynthia swept the light beam around her, still strangely reluctant to leave. She went to the mirror and wiped it. Her reflection looked ghastly, surprised, in the stark light. 'You've gone, Emma, haven't you?' she said softly. Her breath fogged the glass again and, mistily, it seemed to Cynthia that her reflection wavered and convulsed, twisting her dimly-seen reflection into something different; more strange yet more familiar. It seemed she stood against a background of rock and cloud.

Cynthia uttered an alarmed mewing sound and abruptly wiped the glass. Relieved, she found her own, accustomed image looking back at her. *An illusion. I've had enough of this place, enough of Emma.* Sniffing, Cynthia turned around. This time she meant to leave.

A tall figure stood in the doorway, caught in the beam of Cynthia's flashlight. She cried out in alarm. It was a young man, arms above his head, resting his hands on the door frame. There was a certain proprietorial air about the pose. The silence lasted only seconds but in that time, Cynthia saw and realized who he was. She recognized the beautiful face, the red hair, the long, white hands. This man had Emma's face, Emma's hair, Emma's eyes, Emma's cruel smile of the nightmares. She had seen his image in a hundred of Emma's sketches and paintings. She had seen him naked.

The man came into the room, leisurely closed the door and, folding his arms, leaned back against it. He said nothing, although he didn't seem surprised to find Cynthia there. Had he watched her enter the house?

Cynthia tried to take a step backwards and found she couldn't. Her shoulders were against the mirror. 'What the hell are you doing here?' she demanded, aware of the tremor in her voice. She realized she was trapped. Fear paralysed her.

'I might ask the same of you,' said the man.

'My husband and I look after the place. He'll be over here soon. '

The man laughed. It was a melodious, musical sound. 'You're a good woman, Cynthia,' he said. 'I'm glad you liked my paintings. I'm glad you saved them. You've been a good friend to Emma.'

Cynthia's mouth had turned to glue. Her jaw ached and she was conscious of a numbness creeping through her limbs, as if presaging a faint. Images of her own comfortable, safe living-room flashed before her eyes. A mockery; she was neither comfortable or safe and further away from home than she'd ever been. An image of violence and murder superimposed itself over the fading memory of her familiar setting. *'Who are you?"*

'A friend,' he answered. 'Don't be afraid.' He unfolded his arms, rubbed his hands together. 'I've been waiting to speak with you. I want you to help me.'

This apparently reasonable request slightly reassured Cynthia. Perhaps everything would be all right. 'You had better come over to the house. My husband.. '

'Who is still at work. ' The man laughed again. 'I want you to help me *here,* Cynthia. It won't take a moment.'

Panic slipped back into Cynthia's mind. He knew her name. Her voice was a squeak. 'What do you want?'

'It's quite simple. I want you to turn around, very slowly, and take down tie mirror from the wall.'

'Why?'

'Please do as I say.'

Cynthia's mind quickly juggled the thoughts of whether it would be wiser to comply or refuse. She would be helpless with her back turned. Why did he want *her* to move the mirror? But even as she was still trying to come to a decision, she could feel her body moving by itself, turning round. Her neck felt wrenched; she did not want to take her eyes from the intruder. An urge to scream built up within her, a scream she knew would never escape the constriction in her chest.

'That's right,' said the man. 'Gently now.'

A weird sound, that of strangled sobbing, whined from Cynthia's throat as her neck cricked round to face the wall. She watched as if from a distance as her arms moved automatically to ease the glass from its hanging. Its damp surface pressed against her cheek and she staggered under its weight. The man didn't move to help her. 'I still need it, you see,' he said. 'Just for a while, until I know what I'm doing. You can help me, Cynthia, because I don't think the new residents of this place would want to, do you?'

Cynthia was draped over the mirror, mouth hanging open, fighting for breath. 'Who *are* you?' she managed to whisper and then the fatal question, the one she didn't want to ask but couldn't stop. 'Did you kill Emma?'

The man smiled. 'I suppose I did, in a way, but not in any manner you could imagine or comprehend.' The smile faded from his lips. He moved quickly towards Cynthia and put his hands on her face,

ignoring her cry of horror. ‘Cynthia, please know me! Please! I need your help!’

Cynthia’s flesh chilled. She wanted to pull away from the warm, slim hands. ‘No!’ she said, but it was a weak sound.

‘Yes! Yes!’ There was fire in the man’s eyes, a dancing light. ‘Cynthia, I had to do this. I can’t explain why to you, because you wouldn’t understand. It’s something that’s been with me for a long time. I created the image, and put it into the mirror. With my eyes, with my sex.’

‘Emma,’ Cynthia said.

‘I had to undress myself from the flesh, for the new flesh to *become.’*

The man moved away from Cynthia’s tense, crippled stasis. He glanced around the room. ‘Everything’s destroyed. It’s as it should be, but you.. ’ He turned to her again. ‘You kept some of it back. You are my gateway, Cynthia. Felicia is my guide, but I’ve missed her somehow. ’

‘She’s been here,’ Cynthia said.

The man nodded. ‘I know. She’s waiting for me, somewhere. Once the image was fuelled, it could act, it *became.* I know this all sounds bizarre to you, but there are wondrous things in the world, things you can be, and do, if you only admit the possibility. I’m here now, Cynthia. This is me as I want to be.’

‘You killed yourself,’ Cynthia said. Her instincts hadn’t lied to her the day Michael Homey had turned up. Emma had been fine, more than fine. Cynthia wanted to sit down; her skull felt as if it was about to crack with the weight of the unbearable knowledge it now contained.

The man smiled at her gently. ‘Do I look dead? You have touched me, haven’t you?’

‘What is the mirror for?’ Cynthia asked.

‘I’m not fully out of it,’ replied the man. ‘Not yet.’ He shivered. ‘It’s yours now, Cynthia. You must put it on your bedroom wall.’

‘No,’ Cynthia said, uselessly.

‘Come on, it’s cold in here. Let’s go home.’

Back in her own house, the mirror propped up against the wall, Cynthia curled up in an armchair and drank a large tumbler of Scotch. She was alone. The back door had been left open and all the rooms were in darkness. She hugged herself tightly, cold. Cars passed the house, lights from the other houses glowed into the dark. Behind other doors, husbands talked about their day to wives, and children splashed in steaming, bedtime baths. Dreams would settle, and when the new residents of Wren’s Nest moved in, memories would fade. Life

would go on.

Cynthia, sitting somewhat apart from this world of cosy domesticity, gazed into the mirror and drank her Scotch. The moment when the unseen becomes seen changes life for ever. There is a sense of loss, when ignorance dies. Emma Tizard seemed such a nice girl.

* * *

Storm Constantine's most recent fantasy novels are the 'Grigori' trilogy: *Stalking the Tender Prey, Scenting Hallowed Blood* and *Stealing Sacred Fire,* which explore the theme of fallen angels, drawing upon angel mythology from around the world. As the author explains, '"Such a Nice Girl" is a sequel to another story of mine, "Candle Magic", which appeared in the anthology *Blue Motel: Narrow Houses Volume Three* (edited by Peter Crowther), although the two stories can be read as stand-alones. After I wrote "Candle Magic" I wanted to know what happened to the protagonists, and "Such a Nice Girl" just kind of popped out!' The tale will also be included in a limited edition collection of the author's fiction, to be published in the USA by DNA Books.

Pieces
RAY GARTON

I've been coming to pieces lately. It seems that the more things come together in my mind, the more I come to pieces.

I've been in therapy for a long time, but it really hasn't seemed to help. Oh, sure, it's made me break down and cry a few times — something that men, in our society, aren't really supposed to do, no matter *what* Phil Donahue says — but it hasn't improved things any. I wasn't even sure why I was there in the first place, except that something just seemed. wrong.

Just a few days ago, it hit me. It was like a lightning strike, like a sixties acid flashback, or some sort of memory flash a Vietnam vet would have. My father hovering over me in bed in the dark of one rainy night, telling me that we were just playing a game, that's all, but a secret game, a *secret* game that no one else could know about, so I would have to keep it a secret, a deep dark secret, and tell *nobody*. But the game hurt. It hurt bad.

It came to me while I was sitting alone one night on the sofa in only my underwear reading a magazine article about child abuse, and it seemed to come out of that part of my brain that was only black, with nothing in it, like a blind spot in my eye. In fact, it *exploded* from that part of my brain and, at the same time, the fourth and fifth toes dropped off my left foot, which was dangling loosely from my knee, and fell to the carpet with soft little tapping sounds.

Of course, that wasn't my only problem at the time. My wife had just left me because, as she put it, 'You are un-understandable. There's something about you that is unreachable and untouchable and it seems to make you just as angry as it makes me sad. I can't take it any more.'

So she left. A few hours later, my right earlobe broke away and peeled off like a piece of dead skin.

But I guess that's getting off the subject, isn't it? Back to the secret games. I'm not sure when they happened or how long they went on. I'd never brought it up with my therapist. I'd stopped therapy some time ago because I figured I could sit home and cry for a hell of

a lot less money, and the memory flashes did not start until my appointments stopped.

I had six weeks of vacation coming at work — I'm a shift manager at a power plant — and after my wife left me, I decided to take them all at once. I had nothing in mind, just. rest. A relief, I guess.

I remember something my wife told me. She said, 'There's something inside you that you know nothing about and you have *got* to take a break, just take a vacation from your life and find out *what it is!'*

That wasn't my reason for taking the vacation. I was just tired. I mean, your wife leaves you, you get hit with some memory you hadn't conjured up since you were a kid. you deserve a vacation, right? So I took it.

To tell you the truth, I wasn't that concerned about my earlobe or my toes. I tossed them into the trash. No big deal, really. It hadn't hurt, there was no bleeding and I didn't even have a limp. But I admit I was surprised by the suddenness of their departure. But so what, right? A couple toes? An earlobe? Big deal.

So, I took the vacation. I had nothing in mind but to sit around the house and relax, do nothing. Watch TV. Watch movies on the VCR. Read. Sleep. Relax.

Then I got broad-sided by that memory, that. *thing.*

I put it out of my head, went out of the house and browsed through a video store and picked up half a dozen movies to watch. The video store was in a mall and, to pass the time, I decided to do some window-shopping.

It was outside a store called Art 2 Go that the next memory hit me. In the window, I saw a painting of a little boy who looked so innocent. and yet, there was something in his eyes that seemed so *adult,* so grown up and mature, and so very, very haunting.

My mind suddenly filled with the memory of my father holding me down on his lap and I remember the hard, throbbing thing beneath me.

My left hand dropped to the floor.

I stared at it as if it were an ice cream cone dropped by a child.

A fat woman with red-dyed hair began to scream. She screamed loud and pointed at the hand and dropped her brown paper bag.

I swung the plastic bag of videos under my left arm, picked up the hand, and hurried away, hoping no one else had noticed. The woman's screams faded behind me.

I took it home with me, that hand, and put it on the coffee table, staring at it as I sat on the sofa. Suddenly, I didn't want to watch any of the videos I'd got.

But I put one in anyway, just for the noise. I sat on the sofa, mostly staring at my hand on the coffee table. Occasionally, I looked up at the movie. At one point, I saw a screaming little child being chased down a hallway by a man whose big hands reached out like mitts to clutch the child's hair and—

— I suddenly remembered the time my father had done the same to me. The memory had come from nowhere, slamming into my face like a slab of concrete;

My right arm disconnected itself from my body and slid out of my shirt sleeve, falling to the floor with a *thunk*.

The child on television screamed, and was dragged backwards to the bedroom.

My eyes widened until they were bulging.

My left arm plunked to the floor.

I began to cry uncontrollably. I couldn't help myself. The tears flowed and my body — what was left of it — quaked with sobs.

My father had done that very thing to me. He had done many other things to me, things that pranced around at the edge of my memory. I wanted to remember them, to bring them up…and yet, I did not, because they were horrible, far too horrible to hold up before my mind's eye for inspection.

I looked at the coffee table and saw my hand. I thought of my earlobe and toes. I looked down at the floor and saw my pale, disembodied arms.

And suddenly, I felt sick.

I rushed, armless, to the bathroom and vomited for a while, then hurried into the bedroom, assuming I had little time left.

In the bedroom, I had an electric typewriter set up on a small table. I managed to place a piece of paper firmly in the carriage with my mouth, then lean down and use my mouth to reel the paper in. Then, I began to type this with my nose. It has taken a long time.

But in that time, my mind has been working frantically with the memories that have been conjured up like bloated corpses from the bottom of a bog. In fact, just a few minutes ago, I remembered my father saying to me once, 'Just pretend it's a popsicle, that's all. just a popsicle…suck on it like it's a popsicle.' And then my right leg, from the knee down, slid out of my pantleg like a snake and thunked to the bedroom floor.

I've been trying not to think about it, trying to concentrate on what I'm doing, typing this as fast as I can with my nose, to tell whoever finds me what happened.

But another memory comes to mind, this one far worse than all the others, more painful and more horrible and

* * *

Ray Garton's most recent novel, *Shackled,* is his fourteenth book. His other novels include *Seductions, Crucifax Autumn, The New Neighbor, Lot Lizards* and the movie novelizations *Invaders from Mars* and *Warlock. Live Girls,* first published in 1987, will be reissued in a limited hardcover edition from Cemetery Dance Publications; the new printing will include a CD of music inspired by the novel, composed and performed by Scott Vlad Licina, plus sound effects and snatches of dialogue. The same publisher has recently issued Garton's latest novel, *Biofire,* with a mass-market paperback due early next year. His short fiction is collected in *Methods of Madness* and *Pieces of Hate.* 'I saw a woman on a daytime talk show — I think it was *The Jerry Springer Show* — who claimed to have been molested as a child, but she had buried the memory for years,' reveals the

author. ‘It had suddenly returned to her as an adult in the form of nightmares and vivid flashbacks. She said repeatedly that as her memories became more coherent, she began to “break down”, to “fall apart”, and to “go to pieces”. But everyone she knew, especially her immediate family, thought she was crazy. I wondered how her friends and family would have felt — and how she would have felt — if those memories had made her “go to pieces” literally. A little later, I wrote “Pieces” and put that thought to work.’

Aunt Libby's Grave
MELANIE TEM

Libby glided from the sitting-room to the bedroom. She sat in both, slept in both and on the dusty floor of the roughly pentagonal central hall off which they and three other rooms opened like petals. No matter how unclear the functions of things were, it was important to have names for them.

She crept from the bedroom to the study. Papa brought her books and she did indeed study them, her mind's alchemy transforming the information into her mind's own thing.

She sped from the study to the nursery, which was empty, which had in it pale lovely light and motes of dust like old lace. It was not really a nursery; she only called it that to gather in one place her desolation and resolve. Another room might gather tedium, or joy.

Pulling her pink sweater more tightly around her, she sang so they would hear her — in the rest of the house, moving behind walls; in the wide world, drifting from window to window; in days gone by and days to come.

Aunt Maureen was poised to tell a story — the story which Cecelia guessed now, too late, was the reason they'd come to the cemetery. Cecelia didn't want to hear it. She had a strong sense of danger, a physical feeling of dread.

But she liked her Aunt Maureen. She'd always liked her, and now that her mother had died, taking with her any hope that they could be close or that Cecelia would ever be brave enough to ask her why they weren't, her desire for Aunt Maureen to like her had intensified into a childish yearning.

That was why she'd taken the long train ride from Denver to Detroit to visit — hoping for guidance, maybe; hoping for approval, or just for contact. That was why she'd not had to feign interest in the news of Aunt Maureen and Uncle Everett's grown children, her cousins whom she knew little and liked less, although it had been necessary to conceal her jealousy as their mother talked fondly, worriedly, proudly, knowingly about them. It was why she'd found herself worrying at odd moments about whether she was carrying on a conversation sufficiently polite, about how the things she told of her life were sounding to Aunt Maureen, about whether there was cat hair on her clothes since assuredly no fur-bearing animal had ever set foot in Aunt Maureen's house.

Wanting to please Aunt Maureen was also the main, though

perhaps not the only, reason she'd acquiesced in coming here and standing on this hill in this bright cold autumn afternoon and looking at grave markers neatly embedded in the family plot. Dark grey metal rectangles with raised inscriptions she assumed to be bronze, they were all partially obscured now by leaves skittering in a breeze she couldn't yet feel but would soon enough. Aunt Maureen pointed out those for Cecelia's grandparents, Harry Harkness, whom she remembered without much emotion one way or another, and Martha Harkness, who had died young in childbirth. Those for Elizabeth and Frances Harkness were next in line, separated from the rows for the next family by a blank space which Cecelia found a trifle unsettling.

She couldn't refuse to listen to the story Aunt Maureen had to tell her, nor even let her attention wander for fear her aunt would notice and disapprove. But apprehension made her pulse skitter like the leaves.

'When your Aunt Libby died,' Aunt Maureen declared, 'I was the only one at her funeral. I stood right here, where we're standing now, and I watched the funeral procession come up that hill, and there was just the hearse and the undertaker, and I was the only mourner at the graveside.'

'Why didn't my mother come? Aunt Libby was her sister, too.'

'Dad said Helen and Libby were close when they were girls, but once they were grown they didn't get along.' Aunt Maureen shook her head briskly, as though dismissing the squabbles of her two much-older sisters. But something about the set of her shoulders or the cast of her glance piqued Cecelia's attention.

Maureen was a tiny woman, even shorter than Cecelia's mother had been, considerably thinner, and equally formidable. Cecelia thought she remembered Aunt Libby, the eldest of the Harkness girls, being taller and lean, gaunt to Maureen's wiriness and the stocky sturdiness of her mother Helen. But Aunt Libby had died when Cecelia was no more than three years old, so she hardly remembered her, and she'd discovered that her images of her mother shifted from time to time. She thought about her a good deal and, of course, remembered her vividly, but what she remembered changed. It wasn't as if she'd forgotten what her mother had looked like, but as if she'd never exactly known.

'It was a chilly fall day like this,' Aunt Maureen continued, and as though to illustrate pulled her navy blue sweater tight around her and crossed her arms over it.

Cecelia caught her breath. Her mother used to make a habitual gesture like that. It had been a bright pink sweater with embroidery on the collar, and she'd pull it snug around her just like that and cross her arms, tucking her hands in. The memory, which had been buried

until this moment and had the feel of very early childhood, pierced and hummed like an arrow that had hit its mark, as though it meant something.

The air wasn't moving, but in it was the anticipation of chill golden wind and sleet. The grey-gold sun through layers of hardwood leaves, compressed this late in a Michigan October, had a metallic sheen, a wet-metal taste. Cecelia fumbled for a comment so Aunt Maureen wouldn't think she wasn't interested. In truth, she wasn't particularly interested in Aunt Libby's death and funeral, but she didn't want Aunt Maureen to stop talking to her.

'I stood up here on this very hill and I watched Libby's funeral come towards me—' Cecelia looked where she was pointing, at the winding dirt road below them and beyond. There, in fact, she caught sight of an oncoming funeral procession, a boxy black hearse, one other dark car nearly as tall at the hump as it was long, and — oddly, she thought, though she couldn't quite have said why it was odd — several pedestrians.

The road was apparently much further below them than she'd realized, for the figures stayed tiny, movements blurred by distance and perspective. She blinked, glanced at her aunt beside her, looked back. The sad little parade of miniatures was no closer, although it was still in forward motion.

Uncle Clyde's flesh was mostly pale pink, darker pink in some places Libby could not think about, and smooth, hairless. If he'd been hirsute, darker-skinned, or covered with warts, she'd have found his body no more nor less revolting.

When she was little and Uncle Clyde would come to get her, she'd sometimes open his shirt and feel around for his nipples, like little stones in the ocean of his soft smooth flesh. Then he'd whisper to her, or say out loud if he was sure they were alone, 'You like this, too, don't you, sweetie? You *like* your Uncle Clyde.'

Libby did like how his nipples felt under her fingertips. They gave her something to fasten her thoughts on to. Sometimes, too, she'd imagine that she could slit him open by tracing a line from one of those hard pinkish-brown dots to the other and his pink heart would tumble out into her hand. That never happened.

All the women in the family knew about Uncle Clyde. As girls grew up, they learned what to say about him. 'Oh, that's just Clyde,' Grandma said nervously the single time Libby — thirteen years old, scrubbing clothes on the washboard in the big black tub — told her about the kisses he stole from her in the pantry, which was not the worst she had to tell. Her little sister Helen was peeling potatoes on the back porch, out of sight but not out of earshot, and Maureen,

crawling, was under everybody's feet, with Mama eight months dead.

'Clyde is a good man,' she was instructed sternly. 'Clyde is a man of God,' and Libby, observing, could see that this was true. Uncle Clyde performed many acts of charity. He was a good husband, a good father, a good neighbour. Everybody loved Uncle Clyde. For a little while, she tried it on, like somebody else's frock, feeling chosen.

'He does it to me, too,' Helen informed her from the other edge of the billowing sheet as they changed his bed the next Monday morning. 'Maureen's next, you know,' and that was when, for the first time in her life but by no means the last, Libby was aware of making up her mind to do something hard, something she was afraid to do. She would tell her father, Helen's father, too, and Maureen's, a man newly bereft of his wife and Uncle Clyde's brother. She would tell. Frightened as she was, full of dread as she was, her resolution buoyed her, made her feel grown-up and strong, gave her something better to fasten her thoughts on to.

Walking home from school the next day, worrying about telling, worrying about the English exam on Friday and about the ink stain on her skirt, she smelled something funny. Ever since she was little she didn't like going past that big old tree in front of the grocery store, because it had a knob on it that looked for all the world like somebody hiding, waiting to jump out and grab her. This time when she hurried past it, there was an odour, vaguely bitter, wrongly sweet, and then a man was walking beside her.

Libby did her best to edge away. The man said in a pleasant voice, 'I won't hurt you, Libby,' which made her even more afraid.

'How do you know my name?'

He was nicely dressed. His hands were in his pockets. That bittersweet smell seemed to be coming from him, although it was so faint she couldn't be sure. 'You know,' he said in a tone so friendly it was threatening, 'if you tell your father what you've been doing with Uncle Clyde you'll cause a great deal of trouble in the family. Your father is suffering already because of your mother's death.'

Tears hurt Libby's throat at the mention of her mother. Confused, she found herself puzzling over how this stranger knew about that, rather than, she realized later, the greater mystery of how he could know about Uncle Clyde and that she'd decided to tell. Maybe he was a family friend. Maybe he'd been at the funeral. She thought his voice did sound familiar.

'Your father cries at night.' From the angle of his voice he might have been looking gently down at her, although she could hardly see him beside her. 'Did you know that, Libby?' The thought of Papa's sorrow was worse than her own. 'If you tell him, you will only give him more to cry about.'

Libby didn't know what to think. She stayed silent.

'You don't *have* to say anything. You're almost grown up now. Uncle Clyde won't bother you any more. He doesn't like grown-up women.'

'My sisters—'

'Helen can take care of herself. She's growing up, too. And you don't know he'll start with Maureen. You don't know that.' He patted her shoulder. 'You're a good girl, Libby. I trust you to do the right thing.'

He was gone, the after-image of too-bright light fading away, and Libby was left to ponder, fist to her throat, whether what he'd said was wholly or partially true or not true at all.

Aunt Maureen didn't seem especially aware of the procession below them. 'Can you imagine?' Her voice was crisp and controlled; Cecelia had never heard it otherwise. But she was hugging herself. 'You'd think Libby had lived on this earth an entire lifetime and never made a difference to anybody.'

'She made a difference to Frances,' Cecelia protested. A cousin fully a generation older, Aunt Libby's only child, Frances had died a long time ago, Cecelia thought from complications of morbid obesity. Cecelia had hardly known her; it was difficult to comprehend what connection there'd ever been between them, other than the blood-arch, mostly abstract, of their mothers' sisterhood. 'Anyway, do you think that's possible? Not to make a difference to *anybody?'*

Aunt Maureen shot her a look. Cecelia didn't want to seem rude, but she did want to understand what Aunt Maureen was saying. Such questions — whether or not people made a difference as they passed through this world; how to tell whether that was so — had lately come to be of considerable importance to her.

Twenty-five years old that autumn, she was feeling less and less substantial. She and Ray, whom she supposed she would marry when he came home from the war, had seemed scarcely to touch even when they were seeing each other every Saturday night, and her weekly letters to him now might have been written to anyone; if he did not come home, perish the thought, she would mourn what might have been between them more than what was, and she feared she might live to mourn that anyway. Her job with the insurance company, though she was skilled at it, sustained her in no way other than financial. No one with whom she came into contact in the course of a day was likely to remember her once their specific business with each other was done, nor would she remember them. Certainly, if she were to die today, none of them would come to her funeral.

Aunt Maureen, gazing off over the gilt vista through which

Cecelia was still watching the funeral procession move like a model train through a toy landscape, proceeded deliberately. At this point, Cecelia dimly understood that the story was in some way hers, too, if only because she was here, in this place and time, with this purposeful woman who had something to tell her.

The story became more and more hers, too, because it wasn't given to her all of a piece. She had to work for it, put forth something of herself in order to receive it; she could not simply listen passively. As parts of the tale emerged, tales unto themselves, Cecelia was required to interpret, to fill in spaces, to arrange and rearrange incidents and the interstices among incidents so they made sense and then, given more, made sense again.

Later, she would not be sure what Aunt Maureen had actually told her or in what order, what context. Now and then throughout her long life, images and information from that day would present themselves to her — the light's particular glint; the yearning (and it was to be the last of it, really) for Aunt Maureen to tell her what she knew, give her what she had, love her; the chill of unease as imagination played over what might be underground in this place, what the embedded grave markers might be taken to signify. Each time these things would seem to mean something slightly different, something cumulative or stripped down or newly nuanced.

On the train ride home, for instance, she would puzzle over the relative position of the embroidered pink sweater in her own life, the movement of it and the truncation of movement as its wearer repeatedly pulled it snug. The realization would descend on her, stopping her breath for a moment, that it must not have been Helen she remembered doing that but Libby.

William Bradley was earnest, decent, rather dull-witted. He loved her, he insisted gamely; he could love her. Libby did not believe that, though it was kind of him to say so, and it would not have persuaded her if she had. 'I can't marry you,' she said to him. 'I'm crazy. Everybody knows that. Don't you know that?'

'I have a duty to our child.' The words were resolute, but clearly he was appalled to be saying 'our' to her about anything, let alone a child, and already grateful that he would not be bound to say it much longer.

'I'll do what's right,' Libby promised. 'Send money.'

'Kill the child.'

It was not, of course, William Bradley who suggested such a thing. There was an actual voice but no visible source for it, and, more than hearing it, Libby felt the voice in her hollow bones. There was a bittersweet fragrance, too, that clung to the skin between the bones of

her fingers as they stretched around the baby's tiny neck. She clenched her fists in refusal. 'No.'

'What sort of life will this child have?' She had to admit it was a reasonable question. 'You sent young Mr Bradley away. You're crazy. You said so yourself. You barely managed to raise Frances, and look at her.'

'I won't do it.'

'It would be easier on everybody. On you, too.'

'No.' Libby took a deep, steadying, bittersweet breath, and freed her hands from her baby's throat to push his voice and his insinuating odour away.

On that melancholy golden October afternoon in 1942 — soon to be grey and doleful November, another season altogether — Aunt Maureen asserted, as though satisfied that she'd worked it all out in her head, that Frances had died soon after Libby because she hadn't known how to live without her mother. 'A grown woman, you'd have thought she was an orphan,' which prompted Cecelia to ask about Frances's father. Who was he? What had happened to him? It amazed her that she'd apparently never wondered about him before; she thought that could not be true, but she had no memory either of her own curiosity in this regard or of any answers forthcoming or withheld.

It also caused her to think about her own father, but her thoughts, having nothing much to snag on to, didn't stay long with him. Cecelia believed her relationship with her father to be uncomplicated. Easily, they loved each other. She supposed they could be considered neither close nor distant. He mourned her mother now, as did she, but simply, cleanly.

'I don't know,' Aunt Maureen said evenly. 'As far as I could ever tell, almost nobody in the family knew who Frances's father was. Including Frances. Papa didn't know.'

The funeral procession below them gave the strong overall impression of coming closer, while its component parts — dark figures except for one swatch of pink; dark motion — appeared no bigger or clearer than ever. Distracted by this contradictory perspective, Cecelia at first merely nodded in response to the last statement. Then, suddenly disoriented among the tangles of the family tree, she chanced a quick look at her aunt. Aunt Maureen was watching her, and, when Cecelia's glance swung her way, she nodded emphatically.

'But I believe it was Uncle Clyde. Our father's brother. I believe he was Frances's father. Libby and Helen always behaved strangely when his name came up, and he never came to our house, although I heard he used to live there. Libby was fourteen when Frances was

born.'

Cecelia pulled her gaze away, not wanting to stare. For a while when she was the age Aunt Maureen was now, she would find herself flashing back to this moment, this secret told first and smallest among many, as a point at which her life had veered off one course and on to another. Eventually, though, she would cease thinking of life in terms of courses and veerings at all.

'Our mother had died giving birth to me.' Self-consciously, Cecelia waited for some sort of signal as to what her reaction ought to be. This she'd known already, presumably from her mother, although she remembered no time or place she'd been told, no specific conversation, no gift or complaint or instructive intent personally to her.

It was the first time, though, that Aunt Maureen, the infant in question, had spoken of it to her, and she fretted that she should offer reassurance or condolence. There was no hint of a request for such a thing; she'd not have guessed at any particular emotional underlay at all if Aunt Maureen hadn't added, in the same flat declarative tone, 'It wasn't uncommon in those days, you know, for women to die in childbirth.'

'I know,' Cecelia breathed.

Aunt Maureen nodded, allowed her sweater to fall loose, then pulled it around her again. 'Libby raised us both. Frances and me. We grew up more like sisters than aunt and niece. Dad worked a lot to support us and most of the rest of his time he spent looking for a suitable stepmother, which he never found. Helen went off and had adventures. And misadventures.' Aunt Maureen gave a quick smile, then repeated, 'Libby raised us.'

'My mother never talked much about her past,' Cecelia ventured. It was a sad thing to admit. 'She almost never told me stories.'

'I'll tell you.'

There was something ominous about the pledge. Hastily, Cecelia asked, 'Was Aunt Libby a good mother?' It was, truly, something she wanted to know, but the fact that it was also a diversionary tactic made her feel dishonest. Perhaps, then, self-justification was the source of her upsurge of interest in Aunt Maureen's childhood. 'What was it like,' she asked, too eagerly, 'growing up with your sister for a mother and your cousin for a sister and your father never home? Was it confusing? Was it awful?'

'Libby,' said Aunt Maureen grimly, 'did the best she could. She could have said no.'

In the silence that followed, the funeral ascended the hill, though the perspective was still skewed. The hearse in the lead had its headlights on. Two figures, the one in pink and one of the handful of

dark-dressed ones, had broken away from the formal procession leaving it paltry indeed, and, as Aunt Maureen resumed talking, Cecelia watched them against the mown gold and brown cemetery grass. Shadows fell everywhere, and in the thin low light theirs were indistinguishable. They seemed, she saw with something like shock, to be cavorting, and they were holding hands.

Libby said, 'Papa,' and couldn't believe what she was about to do. How could she tell him? How could she speak of such things to her father?

Maybe she would not. Maybe she didn't have to. Almost, she looked away and pretended she hadn't spoken. Most likely, her father wouldn't have pressed, wouldn't have even noticed or would have been glad for one less thing to worry about.

But she thought of Helen, and her fists clenched in her lap. She thought of Maureen, who wouldn't even remember their mother; Maureen, whom Mama had said to take care of. She made herself say again, 'Papa. I have to talk to you.'

He was on his way out, not an unusual circumstance. He had on his big grey coat and was fitting his grey hat over his bald spot, rolling the rim just so, the tiny maroon feather slightly off to the right. He glanced down at her. 'Not now, Libby. I'm late.'

'When? I *have* to talk to you.'

'Later.'

Later, then, very late, she was waiting for him when he came home. She'd fallen asleep at the kitchen table. She woke up, abruptly and fully, at the click of the door and his quiet despairing sigh before he came in and saw her there. 'Papa. Please. I have to tell you something.'

When he took off his hat, his head was so bare she had to look away. When he took off his coat, she saw that his shoulders were shaking. 'I'm exhausted, Libby. Not tonight.'

He was already out of the room, and she was hearing his dogged, hasty footsteps rounding the corner of the living room towards the stairs, when she said, just loud enough for him to hear if he would, 'Uncle Clyde touches me.' The footsteps didn't stop immediately, but they did stop. 'He touches Helen, too. Next he'll start on Maureen, because we'll be too old.'

Her father came back, a large sad man, and Libby was so sorry and ashamed, but her little sister Maureen hadn't done anything wrong, had she? If Uncle Clyde started on her, would it be her fault? It would be Libby's fault if she didn't tell.

Her sad father with his sad footsteps and his uncovered head came back into the kitchen, and Libby could hardly breathe in the face

of his sadness, to which she was adding. He pulled out the chair opposite her, scraping its two back legs across the old wooden floor, and heavily lowered himself into it. She locked her gaze on him and said what she had to say, every dirty word.

Cecelia took a breath and said, although she knew Aunt Maureen had no need of permission or encouragement, 'I know only a handful of things about our family's history. I'd like to know more.'

Later, at various times in her life when secrets from the past seemed especially vital or especially irrelevant to her, she would consider with a certain wonderment what she had thus invited in. Sometimes almost idly, occasionally with an urgency that was utterly impractical, she would wonder what difference it might have made in the lives of her children — particularly of Virginia, who would seem to have the most to gain and to lose — if she hadn't invited Aunt Maureen to tell her this story, or if she'd pressed for more.

Aunt Maureen began by fixing things in place: 'The year was 1916.' For the same reason, Cecelia's attention was momentarily occupied by the fact that she herself would be born the next year. Contemplating time before her birth or after her death always evoked in her a disquieting sense of continuity and insignificance, of being one small bead on an infinitely long and infinitely splitting string. She felt much the same way when she looked up at stars on a clear night, or lay flat in a mountain meadow, or on the one occasion when, on vacation with her parents in Maine, she'd walked along an ocean beach. It was somehow the same feeling, too, that made her back away from cliff rims — for fear not of falling but of jumping.

Aunt Maureen had gone on, oblivious to or, more likely, contemptuous of Cecelia's momentary inattention. 'Libby had another child. I was at the Normal, away from home for the first time, and no one had told me of her condition for fear of disturbing my studies, I suppose, or out of shame, or for some other reason. She and the baby came on the bus. I didn't know she was coming. I understood right away what she wanted.'

For a moment or two, Cecelia puzzled as if over a riddle. Then she shook her head and asked, as she knew she was intended to do, 'What did she want?'

'Why,' said Aunt Maureen, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world, 'she thought I should just give up everything and raise her child. I was young. Your Uncle Everett and I were already engaged. Here she was, a middle-aged woman alone with a grown child, and not well. She never came right out and asked, and I never came right out and refused, but we both understood what was going on between us. For ever after, it was between us.'

The wind had picked up. The navy blue sweater was obviously providing as much warmtb as it was going to, and Aunt Maureen's hands were hidden under her upper arms. Cecelia's cheeks, stiff from the cold, were wet already from the wet wind, although rain wasn't actually falling yet. The mass of clouds descending overhead like a lid didn't yet cover the entire sky, and the gold light skimming in under their edges and through their gradually closing fissures glinted like ore in granite.

'So then what happened to the baby?' All sorts of possibilities flashed through her mind, among them that in this world was a cousin utterly unknown to her and that there was an infant's grave among the others in this hillside plot somewhere.

But Aunt Maureen wasn't ready yet to recount that part of the tale. 'The father,' she said deliberately, 'was a business associate of our father's, a man named William Bradley, a decent man I'd always thought, a good deal younger than Libby. As a matter of fact, at one time I'd considered setting my cap for him myself.'

Restraining herself from glancing sharply in her aunt's direction to assess regret, Cecelia listened for it instead and heard none. 'And he wouldn't marry her,' she supplied.

Aunt Maureen *tsked*. 'My sister refused to marry him. William Bradley tried to do the honourable thing by her, and Libby sent him packing. But then, she wasn't well.'

The funeral now appeared to have reached what, presumably, was the edge of the Harkness family plot, although boundaries were blurred and Cecelia was still confused about the position of the procession relative to herself and Aunt Maureen. The figures were not only undersized and shadowless but also translucent; the gold light glimmered through them, and the grey light, and the suggestion of objects which, when the figures moved, were revealed as not there.

With a shock it came to Cecelia that somehow she'd been regarding this as a re-enactment of Aunt Libby's funeral, and that, because of the motorized vehicles, it could not be. Apparently some aspect of her mind especially suggestible to this ethereal time and place, had readily accepted that a funeral from twenty-three years ago should reappear to her, and only a detail which in fact was irrelevant had made her decide otherwise. That she'd so readily made so ghostly an association gave her gooseflesh, and she found herself pulling her jacket snugly around her in the manner of the Harkness women and tucking her icy hands under her arms.

The hearse and the other black car stopped. Hearing no cessation of engine noise, Cecelia realized she had not been hearing engines in the first place, nor any other sound from the funeral. Silently, small figures disembarked from the two vehicles, and, together with the

straggling pedestrians, formed a little graveside crowd. Six in particularly black coats and black hats lifted a casket from the back of the hearse. The wood of it caught thin sunlight and briefly glowed; fleetingly, metal glinted like the edges of the sky.

The two individuals who had split off from the rest, one pink-and one black-clad, were some distance away now, though it was hard to tell just where they were in relation to anything else. They danced, floated. Cecelia didn't know whether to watch them or the group at the grave, where the casket — dull and self-contained, catching no light now — was being lowered. She didn't know whether she could watch either without losing track of what Aunt Maureen was telling her. Recurring throughout the rest of her life, then, would be the conviction that on that late-autumn afternoon, in a part of the country which otherwise would prove to have no special significance for her, she might have missed something important.

Doubtless because Cecelia had not asked, Aunt Maureen informed her rather testily, 'Libby had always been moody and high-strung. Within a few months after the birth of her second daughter, she had a fully-fledged breakdown.'

At the time, Cecelia thought she had no memory of this, which would have made sense considering her young age when it happened. But later, telling some of the story to Ray who didn't seem especially interested, two clear images came to her that she suspected might be attached to that time and place: Laughter, song, wails echoing, travelling from room to room she couldn't see; and a sign she gradually grew able to read after it had been read to her numerous times: black letters painted unevenly on a cut board, nailed to a door jamb well above her head, then not so high: STOP. DO NOT GO PAST HERE.

Again she asked Aunt Maureen, a bit breathlessly by this time, 'What happened to the baby?'

'Libby gave her to Helen,' Aunt Maureen replied without hesitation. 'Helen raised her as her own.'

For a split second, Cecelia thought she was being told she had a cousin/sister about whom she hadn't known, and she felt as much eagerness as trepidation. But then the events of the story abruptly lined themselves up for her, and she stared at her aunt. 'Aunt Libby was my *mother?'*

'Libby gave you birth,' Aunt Maureen said firmly. 'Helen was your mother.'

Chills sped through her, and she pulled her jacket snug. 'My father was *William Bradley?'*

'Your father is Emil Parmalee.' Aunt Maureen reached out from under her taut dark sweater, and her hand came startlingly around

Cecelia's exposed wrist. 'This doesn't change anything, Cecelia. I just thought you had a right to know.'

There would be times — moments; decades — when this insistent, imposed interpretation would ring true: her understanding of who she was had not, in fact, been changed by what she'd heard and seen that day in the cemetery on the cusp of the seasons. What she knew about herself remained known, and she'd found out nothing new that mattered in any sustained way.

There would also, though, be reeling moments and decades of cumulative vertigo — such as when Ray and the children were all, for their various reasons, busy leaving her — when it would seem to her that some fundamental thing had been shaken that day, some profound and still-hidden depth plumbed. Not until Ray had left for good would she think of searching for William Bradley, and then all the trails would turn out to be cold. Not until she was old herself would she come back to Michigan — this time in hot and humid July — to stand again at Libby's grave. Finding no markers for Aunt Maureen, Uncle Everett, or their two sons also gone by then, Cecelia would conclude that they, like the rest of her own family, must be buried somewhere else, and would muse with acute but indeterminate emotion on the complexities of human connection.

Libby would wake up in the night or, worse, in the middle of the day, alone, and she would bring with her out of fitful sleep that faint bittersweet odour. Sometimes there would be a voice and sometimes not.

'Libby, Libby, you don't have to stay here.'

'I'm not well. Papa says if I won't stay here he'll have to put me in the state hospital.'

'You can get out. There are windows in every room.'

'They don't open. Papa nailed them shut from the outside.' She'd gone with him from window to window, she on the inside and he on the outside, glass between them. He was too old to be climbing so high and working so hard. But she'd stayed with him, and in their companionship had been solace and strength.

'Glass breaks.'

'This is the third floor.'

'I will catch you.'

Libby was distressed that she even considered it, but there was no question that her resolve was greater than her suggestibility. 'No,' she said, and kept saying so.

Then she was freed and the signs were taken down. She had not known there were *signs,* and the discovery of them gave her a peculiar little thrill as rapid-fire fantasies rocked her of who might have read

the warnings, whom they might have been posted for, who might or might not have heeded them. Otherwise, though, her life didn't change much.

Over the years, she took care of her father and he took care of her; when he died she found him, and wept, and made the arrangements. Always she kept a place in her house for Frances to come home to, and Frances required a larger and larger place. She welcomed her sisters and their families on their annual visits, and was only a little sorry to see them off. Once in a while, taking a tiny stitch in another intricate quilt design, she would flinch as the needle, suddenly, pierced her heart with longing for her younger daughter and worry for her elder.

'Take your daughter back. She's yours. Helen isn't her real mother.'

Having held her breath against him as long as she could, Libby took a heady gasp of him. 'Could I?'

'Sure. I'll help you. She's your child.' But it wasn't right, and Libby refused. 'At least tell her,' he urged, exasperated. 'Tell her who you are.' But Libby, tempted, refused.

'What do you want with me?'

He leaned over her as if to kiss her, but still it was only his insinuating voice that touched her, and the odour of him, and his intense body heat. 'You know what I want, Libby. You want it, too.'

She did. 'Surely there are other girls. Younger. Prettier.' To her horror, she was envisioning Frances for him, offering her daughter to him in her mind.

He said, 'Frances is fine enough,' and Libby caught her breath, although she ought not to have been surprised. 'A fine girl. But I want *you*.'

'Who's that?' she demanded with a laugh, then waited anxiously for him to tell her. Was she Uncle Clyde's girl? Frances's crazy mother? The woman who had given away her child?

'Yes, darling. I'm afraid you are all those things.'

Or was she — perilous thought — the woman who, more than once in her life, had made a hard, right choice?

Hastily, he murmured, 'Be mine, Libby, and I'll show you who you are.'

'No,' she said.

They talked about other things until Uncle Everett came for them. Cecelia said a little about Ray. Aunt Maureen told about how close Libby and Frances had been — unhealthily close, she declared, which was the impression Cecelia had already had; during the months Libby was locked for her own safety in her suite at the back and top of the

house, Aunt Maureen said with a shake of the head, Frances had even stayed in there with her for days at a time. Cecelia said it was getting really cold; Aunt Maureen predicted the first snow out of those heavy clouds.

Disappointingly, the two of them seemed to Cecelia no closer than ever. Wistfully she wondered whether Aunt Maureen would come to her wedding. As it turned out, Aunt Maureen and Uncle Everett would agree to take care of their grandchildren that weekend, but they would send a quilt that had been in the family for a long time; a note pinned to it said Aunt Maureen wasn't certain which of her sisters had made it, but she thought Cecelia should have it.

As they wended their way to the road where Uncle Everett waited with the car, Cecelia caught sight once more of the two figures spun loose from the miniature funeral procession, which otherwise was lost now in the thickening mist and twilight gloom. The one in pink stood still. The one in black moved away until she couldn't see it at all any more. A peculiar fragrance, not quite autumnal — vaguely bitter; wrongly sweet — lingered in her nose and on the cold skin of her hands as they drove away.

Melanie Tem's novels include *Prodigal* (winner of the Bram Stoker Award for Superior Achievement), *Revenant, Desmodus, Wilding, Tides, Black River* and, in collaboration with Nancy Holder, *Making Love* and *Witch-Light*. Her short fiction has appeared in *Colorado State Review, Worlds of Fantasy and Horror, Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, Cemetery Dance, Black Maria, Peter Beagles Immortal Unicorn, Dark Angels* and *High Fantastic,* among other magazines and anthologies. Stories are forthcoming in the anthologies *Gargoyles, The Hot Blood Series 9* and *10, Going Postal* and *Snapshots*. She has also published numerous non-fiction articles. About 'Aunt Libby's Grave' she explains: 'It is a chapter from a novel-in-progress, *Round the Earth, Roaming About*. Told as a series of interconnecting chapters/stories that span the life of Cecelia, one of the protagonists of "Aunt Libby's Grave", the novel concerns the moral decisions we are all faced with in our daily lives; if it's true that "God is in the details", then so, I think, is the Devil.'

The Horror Under Warrendown
RAMSEY CAMPBELL

You ask me at least to hint why I refuse ever to open a children's book. Once I made my living from such material. While the imitations of reality hawked by my colleagues in the trade grew grubbier, and the fantasies more shameful, I carried innocence from shop to shop, or so I was proud to think. Now the sight of a children's classic in a bookshop window sends me fleeing. The more apparently innocent the book, the more unspeakable the truth it may conceal, and there are books the mere thought of which revives memories I had prayed were buried for ever.

It was when I worked from Birmingham, and Warrendown was only a name on a signpost on a road to Brichester — a road I avoided, not least because it contained no bookshops. Nor did I care for the route it followed a few miles beyond the Warrendown sign through Clotton, a small settlement which appeared to be largely abandoned, its few occupied houses huddling together on each side of a river, beside which stood a concrete monument whose carvings were blurred by moss and weather. I had never been fond of the countryside, regarding it at best as a way of getting from town to town, and now the stagnant almost reptilian smell and chilly haze which surrounded Clotton seemed to attach itself to my car. This unwelcome presence helped to render the Cotswold landscape yet more forbidding to me, the farmland and green fields a disguise for the ancient stone of the hills, and I resolved to drive south of Brichester on the motorway in future and double back, even though this added half an hour to my journey. Had it not been for Graham Crawley I would never again have gone near the Warrendown road.

In those days I drank to be sociable, not to attempt to forget or to sleep. Once or twice a month I met colleagues in the trade, some of whom I fancied would have preferred to represent a children's publisher too, for a balti and as many lagers as we could stay seated for. Saturdays would find me in my local pub, the Sutton Arms in Kings Heath. Ending my week among people who didn't need to be persuaded of the excellence of my latest batch of titles was enough to set me up for the next week. But it was in the Sutton Arms that Crawley made himself, I suppose, something like a friend.

I don't recall the early stages of the process, in his case or with any of the folk I used to know. I grew used to looking for him in the small bare taproom, where the stools and tables and low ceiling were the colour of ash mixed with ale. He would raise his broad round

stubbled face from his tankard, twitching his nose and upper lip in greeting, and as I joined him he would duck as though he expected me either to pat him on the head or hit him when he'd emitted his inevitable quip. 'What was she up to in the woods with seven little men, eh?' he would mutter, or 'There's only one kind of horn you'd blow up that I know of. No wonder he was going after sheep,' or some other reference to the kind of book in which I travelled. There was a constant undercurrent of ingratiating nervousness in his voice, an apology for whatever he said as he said it, which was one reason I was never at my ease with him. While we talked about our week, mine on the road and his behind the counter of a local greengrocer's, I was bracing myself for his latest sexual bulletin. I never knew what so many women could see in him, and hardly any of them lasted for more than an encounter. My curiosity about the kind of girl who could find him attractive may have left me open to doing him the favour he asked of me.

At first he only asked which route I took to Brichester, and then which one I would follow if the motorway was closed, by which point I'd had enough of the way he skulked around a subject as if he was ready to dart into hiding at the first hint of trouble. 'Are you after a lift?' I demanded.

He ducked his head so that his long hair hid even more of his ears and peered up at me. 'Well, a lift, you know, I suppose, really, yes.'

'Where to?'

'You won't know it, cos it's not much of a place. Only it's not far, not much out of your way, I mean, if you happened to be going that way anyway sometime.'

When at last he released the name of Warrendown like a question he didn't expect to be answered, his irritating tentativeness provoked me to retort 'I'll be in that square of the map next week.'

'Next week, that's next week, you mean.' His face twitched so hard it exposed his teeth. 'I wasn't thinking quite that soon. '

'I'll forgive you if you've given up on the idea.'

'Given up — no, you're right. I'm going, cos I should go,' he said, fiercely for him.

Nevertheless I arrived at his flat the next day not really expecting to collect him. When I rang his bell, however, he poked his nose under the drawn curtains and said he would be down in five minutes; which, to my continuing surprise, he was, nibbling the last of his presumably raw breakfast and dressed in the only suit I'd ever seen him wear. He sat clutching a small case which smelled of vegetables while I concentrated on driving through the rush hour and into the tangle of motorways, and so we were irrevocably on our way before I observed that he was gripping his luggage with all the determination I'd heard

in his voice in the pub. ‘Are you expecting some kind of trouble?’ I said.

‘Trouble.’ He added a grunt which bared his teeth and which seemed to be saying I’d understood so much that no further questions were necessary, and I nearly lost my temper. ‘Care to tell me what kind?’ I suggested.

‘What would you expect?’

‘Not a woman.’

‘See, you knew. Be tricks. The trouble’s what I got her into, as if you hadn’t guessed. Cos she got me going so fast I hadn’t time to wear anything. Can’t beat a hairy woman.’

This was a great deal more intimate than I welcomed. ‘When did you last see her?’ I said as curtly as I could.

‘Last year. She was having it then. Should have gone down after, but I, you know. You know me.’

He was hugging his baggage so hard he appeared to be squeezing out the senseless vegetable smell. ‘Afraid of her family?’ I said with very little sympathy.

He pressed his chin against his chest, but I managed to distinguish what he muttered. ‘Afraid of the whole bloody place.’

That was clearly worth pursuing, and an excuse for me to stay on my usual route, except that ahead I saw all three lanes of traffic halted as far as the horizon, and police cars racing along the hard shoulder towards the problem. I left the motorway at the exit which immediately presented itself.

Framilode, Saul, Fretherne, Whitminster. Old names announced themselves on signposts, and then a narrow devious road enclosed the car with hedges, blotting out the motorway at once. Beneath a sky clogged with dark clouds the gloomy foliage appeared to smoulder; the humped backs of the hills glowed a lurid green. When I opened my window to let out the vegetable smell, it admitted a breeze, unexpectedly chill for September, which felt like my passenger’s nervousness rendered palpable. He was crouching over his luggage and blinking at the high spiky hedges as if they were a trap into which I’d led him. ‘Can I ask what your plans are?’ I said to break the silence which was growing as relentless as the ancient landscape.

‘See her. Find out what she’s got, what she wants me to.’ His voice didn’t so much trail off as come to a complete stop. I wasn’t sure I wanted to know where his thoughts had found themselves. ‘What took you there to begin with?’ was as much as I cared to ask.

‘Beat ricks.’

This time I grasped it, despite his pronouncing it as though unconvinced it was a name. ‘She’s the young lady in question.’

‘Met her in the Cabbage Patch, you know, the caff. She’d just

finished university but she stayed over at my place.' I was afraid this might be the preamble to further intimate details, but he continued with increasing reluctance 'Kept writing to me after she went home, wanting me to go down there, cos she said I'd feel at home.'

'And did you?'

He raised his head as though sniffing the air and froze in that position. The sign for Warrendown, drooping a little on its post, had swung into view along the hedge. His half-admitted feelings had affected me so much that my foot on the accelerator wavered. 'If you'd prefer not to do this. '

Only his mouth moved, barely opening. 'No choice.'

No reply could have angered me more. He'd no more will than one of his own vegetables, I thought, and sent the car screeching into the Warrendown road. As we left behind the sign which appeared to be trying to point into the earth, I had an impression of movement beyond the hedge on both sides of the road, several figures which had been standing absolutely still leaping to follow the car. I told myself I was mistaking at least their speed, and when ragged gaps in the hedges afforded me a view of oppressively green fields weighed down by the stagnant sky, nobody was to be seen, not that anyone could have kept pace with the car. I hadn't time to ponder any of this, because from the way Crawley was inching his face forward I could tell that the sight a mile ahead among the riotous fields surrounded by hunched dark hills must indeed be Warrendown.

At that distance I saw it was one of the elements of the countryside I most disliked, an insignificant huddle of buildings miles from anywhere, but I'd never experienced such immediate revulsion. The clump of thatched roofs put me in mind of dunes surmounted by dry grass, evidence less of human habitation than of the mindless actions of nature. As the sloping road led me down towards them, I saw that the thatch overhung the cottages, like hair dangling over idiot brows. Where the road descended to the level of the village, it showed me that the outermost cottages were so squat they appeared to have collapsed or to be sinking into the earth of the unpaved road. Thatch obscured their squinting windows, and I gave in to an irrational hope that the village might prove to be abandoned. Then the door of the foremost cottage sank inwards, and as I braked, a head poked out of the doorway to watch our arrival.

It was a female head. So much I distinguished before it was snatched back. I glanced at Crawley in case he had recognized it, but he was wrinkling his face at some aspect of the village which had disconcerted him. As the car coasted into Warrendown, the woman reappeared, having draped a scarf over her head to cover even more of her than her dress did. I thought she was holding a baby, then

decided it must be some kind of pet, because as she emerged into the road with an odd abrupt lurch the small object sprang from her arms into the dimness within the cottage. She knotted the scarf and thrust her plump yet flattish face out of it to stare swollen-eyed at my passenger. I was willing to turn the vehicle around and race for the main road, but he was lowering his window, and so I slowed the car. I saw their heads lean towards each other as though the underside of the sky was pressing them down and forcing them together. Their movements seemed obscurely reminiscent, but I'd failed to identify of what when she spoke. 'You're back.'

Though her low voice wasn't in itself threatening, I sensed he was disconcerted that someone he clearly couldn't put a name to had recognized him. All he said, however, was 'You know Beatrix.'

'Us all know one another.'

She hadn't once glanced at me, but I was unable to look away from her. A few coarse hairs sprouted from her reddish face; I had the unpleasant notion that her cheeks were raw from being shaved. 'Do you know where she is?' Crawley said.

'Her'll be with the young ones.'

His head sank as his face turned up further. 'How many?'

'All that's awake. Can't you hear them? I should reckon even he could.'

As that apparently meant me I dutifully strained my ears, although I wasn't anxious to heighten another sense: our entry into Warrendown seemed to have intensified the vegetable stench. After a few moments I made out a series of high regular sounds — childish voices chanting some formula — and experienced almost as much relief as my passenger audibly did. 'She's at the school,' he said.

'That's her. Back where her was always meant for.' The woman glanced over her shoulder into the cottage, and part of a disconcertingly large ear twitched out of her headscarf. 'Feeding time,' she said, and began unbuttoning the front of her dress as she stepped back through the doorway, beyond which I seemed to glimpse something hopping about a bare earth floor. 'See you down there later,' she told Crawley, and shut the door.

I threw the car into gear and drove as fast through the village as I reasonably could. Faces peered through the thick fringes over the low windows of the stunted cottages, and I told myself it was the dimness within that made those faces seem so fat and so blurred in their outlines, and the nervousness with which Crawley had infected me that caused their eyes to appear so large. At the centre of Warrendown the cottages, some of which I took to be shops without signs, crowded towards the road as if forced forward by the mounds behind them, mounds as broad as the cottages but lower, covered with thatch or

grass. Past the centre the buildings were more sunken; more than one had collapsed, while others were so overgrown that only glimpses through the half-obscured unglazed windows of movements, ill-defined and sluggish, suggested that they were inhabited. I felt as though the rotten vegetable sweetness in the air was somehow dragging them all down as it was threatening to do to me, and had to restrain my foot from tramping on the accelerator. Now the car was almost out of Warrendown, which was scarcely half a mile long, and the high voices had fallen silent before I was able to distinguish what they had been chanting — a hymn, my instincts told me, even though the language had seemed wholly unfamiliar. I was wondering whether I'd passed the school, and preparing to tell Crawley I hadn't time to retrace the route, when Crawley mumbled 'This is it.'

'If you say so.' I now saw that the last fifty or so yards of the left-hand side of Warrendown were occupied by one long mound fattened by a pelt of thatch and grass and moss. I stopped the car but poised my foot on the accelerator. 'What do you want to do?'

His blank eyes turned to me. Perhaps it was the strain on them which made them appear to be almost starting out of his head. 'Why do you have to ask?'

I'd had enough. I reached across him to let him out, and the door of the school wobbled open as though I'd given it a cue. Beyond it stood a young woman of whom I could distinguish little except a long-sleeved ankle-length brown dress, my attention having been caught by the spectacle behind her — at least half a dozen small bodies in a restless heap on the bare floor of the dark corridor. As some of them raised their heads lethargically to blink big-eyed at me before subsiding again, Crawley clambered out of the vehicle, blocking my view. 'Thanks for, you know,' he muttered. 'You'll be coming back this way, will you?'

'Does that mean you'll be ready to leave?'

'I'll know better when you come.'

'I'll be back before dark and you'd better be out here on the road,' I told him, and sped off.

I kept him in view in the mirror until the hedges hid Warrendown. The mirror shook with the unevenness of the road, but I saw him wave his free hand after me, stretching his torso towards the car as though he was about to drop to all fours and give chase. Behind him a figure leapt out of the doorway, and as he swung round she caught him. I could distinguish no more about her than I already had, except that the outline of her large face looked furry, no doubt framed by hair. She and Crawley embraced — all her limbs clasped him, at any rate — and as I looked away from this intimacy I noticed that the building of which the school was an extension had once possessed a

tower, the overgrown stones of which were scattered beyond the edge of the village. It was none of my business whether they took care of their church, nor why anyone who'd attended university should have allowed herself to be reduced to teaching in a village school, nor what hold the place seemed to have over Crawley as well. They deserved each other, I told myself, and not only because they looked so similar. Once they were out of sight I lowered the windows and drove fast to rid the car of the stagnant mindless smell of Warrendown.

Before long the track brought me to an unmarked junction with the main road. I wound the windows tight and sped through the remains of Clotton, which felt drowned by the murky sky and the insidious chill of the dark river, and didn't slow until I saw Brichester ahead, raising its hospital and graveyard above its multiplying streets. In those streets I felt more at ease; nothing untoward had ever befallen me in a city such as Brichester, and nothing seemed likely to do so, especially in a bookshop. I parked my car in a multi-storey at the edge of Lower Brichester and walked through the crowds to the first of my appointments.

My Christmas titles went down well — in the last shop of the day, perhaps too well. Not only did the new manager, previously second in command, order more copies than any of her competitors, but in a prematurely festive mood insisted on my helping her celebrate her promotion. One drink led to several, not least because I must have been trying to douse the nervousness with which Crawley and Warrendown had left me. Too late I realized my need for plenty of coffee and something to eat, and by the time I felt fit to drive the afternoon was well over.

Twilight had gathered like soot in cobwebs as wide as the sky. From the car park I saw lights fleeing upwards all over Brichester, vanishing home. The hospital was a glimmering misshapen skull beside which lay acres of bones. Even the fluorescent glare of the car park appeared unnatural, and I sat in my car wondering how much worse the places I had to drive back through would seem. I'd told Crawley I would collect him before dark, but wasn't it already dark? Might he not have decided I wasn't coming for him, and have made his own arrangements? This was almost enough to persuade me I needn't return to Warrendown, but a stirring of guilt at my cowardice shamed me into heading for that morning's route.

The glow of the city sank out of view. A few headlights came to meet me, and then there were only my beams probing the dim road that writhed between the hills, which rose as though in the dark they no longer needed to pretend to slumber. The bends of the road swung back and forth, unable to avoid my meagre light, and once a pair of horned heads stared over a gate, rolling their eyes as they chewed and

chewed, rolling them mindlessly as they would when they went to be slaughtered. I remembered how Crawley's eyes had protruded as he prepared to quit my car.

Well outside Clotton I was seized by the chill of the river. Though my windows were shut tight, as I reached the first abandoned house I heard the water, splashing more loudly than could be accounted for unless some large object was obstructing it. I drove so fast across the narrow bridge and between the eyeless buildings that by the time I was able to overcome my inexplicable panic I was miles up the road, past the unmarked lane to Warrendown.

I told myself I mustn't use this as an excuse to break my word, and when I reached the Warrendown signpost, which looked as though the weight of the growing blackness was helping the earth drag it down, I steered the car off the main road. Even with my headlight beams full on, I had to drive at a speed which made me feel the vehicle was burrowing into the thick dark, which by now could just as well have been the night it was anticipating. The contortions of the road suggested it was doing its utmost never to reach Warrendown. The thorns of the hedges tore at the air, and a gap in the tortured mass of vegetation let me see the cottages crouching furtively, heads down, in the midst of the smudged fields. Despite the darkness, not a light was to be seen.

It could have been a power failure — I assumed those might be common in so isolated and insignificant a village — but why was nobody in Warrendown using candles or flashlights? Perhaps they were, invisibly at that distance, I reassured myself. The hedges intervened without allowing me a second look. The road sloped down, giving me the unwelcome notion that Warrendown had snared it, and the hedges ended as though they had been chewed off. As my headlights found the outermost cottages, their long-haired skulls seemed to rear out of the earth. Apart from that, there was no movement all the way along the road to the half-ruined church.

The insidious vegetable stench had already begun to seep into the car. It cost me an effort to drive slowly enough through the village to look for the reason I was here. The thatched fringes were full of shadows which shifted as I passed as though each cottage was turning its idiot head towards me. Though every window was empty and dark, I felt observed, increasingly so as the car followed its wobbling beams along the deserted lane, until I found it hard to breathe. I seemed to hear a faint irregular thumping — surely my own unsteady pulse, not a drumming under the earth. I came abreast of the church and the school, and thought the thumping quickened and then ceased. Now I was out of Warrendown, but the knowledge that I would be returning to the main road whichever direction I chose persuaded me to make a

last search. I turned the car, almost backing it into one of the overgrown blocks of the fallen tower, and sounded my horn twice.

The second blare followed the first into the silent dark. Nothing moved, not a single strand of thatch on the cottages within the congealed splash of light cast by my headlamps, but I was suddenly nervous of what response I might have invited. I eased the car away from the ruins of the tower and began to drive once more through Warrendown, my foot trembling on the accelerator as I made myself restrain my speed. I was past the school when a dim shape lurched into my mirror and in pursuit of the car.

Only my feeling relatively secure inside the vehicle allowed me to brake long enough to see the face. The figure flared red as though it was being skinned from head to foot, and in the moment before its hands jerked up to paw at its eyes I saw it was Crawley. Had his eyes always been so sensitive to sudden light? I released the brake pedal and fumbled the gears into neutral, and saw him let his hands fall but otherwise not move. It took some determination on my part to lower the window in order to call to him. 'Come on if you're coming.'

I barely heard his answer; his voice was indistinct — clogged. 'I can't.'

I would have reversed alongside him, except there wasn't room to pass him if he stayed put in the middle of the road. I flung myself out of the car in a rage and slammed the door furiously, a sound that seemed to provoke a renewed outbreak of muffled drumming, which I might have remarked had I not been intent on trying to wave away the suffocating vegetable smell. 'Why not?' I demanded, staying by the car.

'Come and see.'

I wasn't anxious to see more of Warrendown, or indeed of him. In the backwash of the car's lights his face appeared swollen with more stubble than an ordinary day could produce, and his eyes seemed dismayingly enlarged, soaking up the dimness. 'See what?' I said. 'Is it your young lady?'

'My what?'

I couldn't judge whether his tone was of hysterical amusement or panic or both. 'Beatrix,' I said, more loudly than I liked to in the abnormal silence and darkness. 'Is it your child?'

'There isn't one.'

'I'm sorry,' I murmured, uncertain whether I should be. 'You mean Beatrix. '

I was loath to put into words what I assumed she must have done, but he shook his blurred head and took an uncertain step towards me. I had the impression, which disturbed me so much I was distracted from the word he'd inched closer to mutter, that he couldn't quite

remember how to walk. ‘What are you saying?’ I shouted before my voice flinched from the silence. ‘What’s absurd? Never mind. Tell me when you’re in the car.’

He’d halted, hands dangling in front of his chest. His protruding teeth glinted, and I saw that he was chewing — seemed to glimpse a greenishness about his mouth and fattened cheeks. ‘Can’t do that,’ he mumbled.

Did he mean neither of us would be able to return to the car? ‘Why not?’ I cried.

‘Come and see.’

At that moment no prospect appealed to me less — but before I could refuse he turned his back and leapt into the dark. Two strides, or at least two convulsive movements, carried him to the doorless entrance to the church. The next moment he vanished into the lightless interior, and I heard a rapid padding over whatever served for a floor; then, so far as the throbbing of my ears allowed me to distinguish, there was silence.

I ran to the church doorway, which was as far as the faintest glow from my headlights reached. ‘Crawley,’ I called with an urgency meant to warn him I had no intention of lingering, but the only response from the dark was a feeble echo of my call, followed by a surge of the omnipresent vegetable stench. I called once more and then, enraged almost beyond the ability to think, I dashed to my car. If I had still been rational — if the influence of Warrendown had not already fastened on my mind — I would surely have left my acquaintance to his chosen fate and driven for my life. Instead I fetched my flashlight from under the dashboard and having switched off the headlamps and locked the car, returned to the rotting church.

As the flashlight beam wavered through the doorway I saw that the place was worse than abandoned. The dozen or so pews on either side of the aisle, each pew broad enough to accommodate a large family, were only bloated green with moss and weeds; but the altar before them had been levered up, leaning its back against the rear wall of the church and exposing the underside of its stone. I swung the beam through the desecrated interior and glimpsed crude drawings on the mottled greenish walls as shadows of pews pranced across them. There was no trace of Crawley, and nowhere for him to hide unless he was crouching behind the altar. I stalked along the aisle to look, and almost fell headlong into a blackness that was more than dark. Just in time the flashlight beam plunged into the tunnel which had been dug where the altar ought to have stood.

The passage sloped quite gently into the earth, further than my light could reach. It was as wide as a burly man, but not as tall as I. Now I realized what my mind had been reluctant to accept as I’d

heard Crawley disappear into the church — that his footfalls had seemed to recede to a greater distance than the building could contain. I let the beam stray across the pews in a last desperate search for him, and was unable to avoid glimpsing the images scrawled on the walls, an impious dance of clownish figures with ears and feet so disproportionately large they must surely be false. Then Crawley spoke from the tunnel beyond the curve which my light barely touched. 'Come down. Come and see.'

A wave of the stench like a huge vegetable breath rose from the tunnel and enveloped me. I staggered and almost dropped the flashlight — and then I lowered myself into the earth and stumbled in a crouch towards the summons. The somnolence audible in Crawley's voice had overtaken me too, and there seemed no reason why I should not obey, nor anything untoward about my behaviour or my surroundings. Even the vegetable stench was to my taste, because I had inhaled so much of it since venturing back to Warrendown. Indeed, I was beginning to want nothing more than to be led to its source.

I stooped as far as the bend in the tunnel, just in time to see Crawley's heels vanishing around a curve perhaps fifty yards ahead. I saw now, as I had resisted hearing, that his feet were unshod — bare, at any rate, though the glimpse I had of them seemed hairier than any man's feet should be. He was muttering to me or to himself, and phrases drifted back: '. the revelations of the leaf. the food twice consumed…the paws in the dark.. the womb that eats. ' I thought only my unsteady light was making the passage gulp narrower, but before I gained the second bend I had to drop to all fours. Far ahead down the increasingly steep tunnel the drumming I'd heard earlier had recommenced, and I imagined that the models for the figures depicted on the church walls were producing the sound, drumming their malformed feet as they danced in some vast subterranean cavern. That prospect gave me cause to falter, but another vegetable exhalation from below coaxed me onwards, to the further bend around which Crawley's heels had withdrawn. I was crawling now, content as a worm in the earth, the flashlight in my outstretched hands making the tunnel swallow in anticipation of me each time my knees bumped forward. The drumming of feet on earth filled my ears, and I saw Crawley's furred soles disappear a last time at the limit of the flashlight beam, not around a curve but into an underground darkness too large for my light to begin to define. His muttering had ceased as though silenced by whatever had met him, but I heard at last the answer he had given me when I'd enquired after the child: not 'absurd' at all. He'd told me that the child had been *absorbed.* Even this was no longer enough to break through the influence of whatever

awaited me at the end of the tunnel, and I crawled rapidly forward to the subterranean mouth.

The flashlight beam sprawled out ahead of me, doing its best to illuminate a vast space beneath a ceiling too high even to glimpse. At first the dimness, together with shock or the torpor which had overcome my brain, allowed me to avoid seeing too much: only a horde of unclothed figures hopping and leaping and twisting in the air around an idol which towered from the moist earth, an idol not unlike a greenish Easter Island statue overgrown almost to featurelessness, its apex lost in the darkness overhead. Then I saw that one of the worshipping horde was Crawley, and began to make out faces less able to pass for human than his, their great eyes bulging in the dimness, their bestial teeth gleaming in misshapen mouths. The graffiti on the church walls had not exaggerated their shapes, I saw, nor were they in costume. The earth around the idol swarmed with their young, a scuttling mass of countless bodies which nothing human could have acknowledged as offspring. I gazed numbly down on the ancient rite, which no sunlight could have tolerated — and then the idol moved.

It unfurled part of itself towards me, a glimmering green appendage which might have been a gigantic wing emerging from a cocoon, and as it reached for me it whispered seductively with no mouth. Even this failed to appal me in my stupor; but when Crawley pranced towards me, a blasphemous priest offering me the unholy sacrament which would bind me to the buried secrets of Warrendown, some last vestige of wholesomeness and sanity within me revolted, and I backed gibbering along the tunnel, leaving the flashlight to blind anything which might follow.

All the way to the tunnel entrance I was terrified of being seized from behind. Every inhabitant of Warrendown must have been at the bestial rite, however, because I had encountered no hindrance except for the passage itself when I scrambled out beneath the altar and reeled through the lightless church to my car. The lowered heads of the cottages twitched their scalps at me as I sped recklessly out of Warrendown, the hedges beside the road clawed the air as though they were determined to close their thorns about me, but somehow in my stupor I managed to arrive at the main road, from where instincts which must have been wholly automatic enabled me to drive to the motorway, and so home, where I collapsed into bed.

I slept for a night and a day, such was my torpor. Even nightmares failed to waken me, and when eventually I struggled out of bed I half believed that the horror under Warrendown had been one of them. I avoided Crawley and the pub, however, and so it was more than a week later I learned that he had disappeared — that his

landlord had entered his room and found no bed in there, only a mound of overgrown earth hollowed out to accommodate a body — at which point my mind came close to giving way beneath an onslaught of more truth than any human mind should be required to suffer.

Is that why nobody will hear me out? How can they not understand that there may be other places like Warrendown, where monstrous gods older than humanity still hold sway? For a time I thought some children's books might be trying to hint at these secrets, until I came to wonder whether instead they are traps laid to lure children to such places, and I could no longer bear to do my job. Now I watch and wait, and stay close to lights that will blind the great eyes of the inhabitants of Warrendown, and avoid anywhere that sells vegetables, which I can smell at a hundred yards. Suppose there are others like Crawley, the hybrid spawn of some unspeakable congress, at large in our streets? Suppose they are feeding the unsuspecting mass of humanity some part of the horror I saw at the last under Warrendown?

What sane words can describe it? Partly virescent, partly glaucous — pullulating — internodally stunted — otiose — angiospermous — multifoliate— Nothing can convey the dreadfulness of that final revelation, when I saw how it had overcome the last traces of humanity in its worshippers, who in some lost generation must have descended from imitating the denizens of the underworld to mating with them. For as the living idol unfurled a sluggish portion of itself towards me, Crawley tore off that living member of his brainless god, sinking his teeth into it to gnaw a mouthful before he proffered it, glistening and writhing with hideous life, to me.

* * *

Ramsey Campbell has recently completed a new suspense novel, *The Last Voice They Hear*. His other novels include *The House on Nazareth Hill, The One Safe Place* and *The Long Lost*. On the non-fiction side his latest contribution is a major piece on British film history in Stefan Jaworzyn's *Shock*. His published short stories run into the hundreds, and his collections include *Waking Nightmares, Strange Things Stranger Places* and *Alone With the Horrors*. Campbell's short fiction has been included in both previous editions of *Dark Terrors* and about his contribution to this volume, he recalls: 'Before learning from Leiber and Nabokov and Graham Greene, I acquired skills by imitating Lovecraft, and I've often felt there are a few more Lovecraftian tales in me. (In

one of my early stories, “The Insects from Shaggai”, I made such a hash of Lovecraft’s unused idea about alien insects that guilt keeps prompting me to have another go at it.) A couple of years ago I was Guest of Honour at Necronomicon in Massachusetts, and Chaosium, the American publisher of Lovecraftian role-playing games — some of whose players, I hear it rumoured, have to be let out of their attics by their families to play, and then only by a light too dim for a sane eye to discern their outlines — undertook to publish a book in tribute. This was Scott David Aniolowski’s anthology *Made in Goatswood,* composed of stories set in the Cotswold area I’d made peculiarly my own — and I do mean peculiarly. Scott asked if I would provide an Introduction, but it occurred to me that here was the perfect excuse for me to develop one of the Lovecraftian ideas lurking in the pit I call my brain. I wrote it in time for the book to be launched at the convention, and read it aloud there, to the unstoppable accompaniment of a New Orleans jazz band in the nearby restaurant. Despite that, it was gravely received. When I performed it later for the Preston SF Group, however, some Lovecraftian tittering was audible from Bryan Talbot, most recently famous — deservedly so — as the creator of *The Tale of One Bad Rat.* Can he have glimpsed some dark secret of my tale?’

Skinned Angels
KATHRYN PTACEK

Jim didn't want to go into the shop, but his wife insisted. 'We're tourists, and we should be doing touristy things,' she said.

He relented. After all, it was his vacation — their vacation — and they were out to have fun, or at least that was the theory. Poking around in old shops was his wife's idea of amusement; it wasn't his, but he wanted to please her. They'd had some problems recently, and this trip to Santa Fe was one of the things they'd thought might start to help.

The bell clanged over the door as Jim pushed the glass door open. Immediately he wrinkled his nose. Old dust, dried herbs, perfumes and spicy incense assaulted his senses, and beneath it was the smell of something he couldn't quite put his finger on. He wanted to sneeze, but managed to control it.

Bev was already across the room, examining some rugs heaped into mounds along one side of the store. They had a handful of Indian rugs in their house and he hoped she wouldn't insist that they buy some more. He didn't know why he resisted everything; it wasn't as if buying one more rug would break them financially, and he actually liked Indian rugs quite a lot. 'You're so negative,' Bev accused him, and she was right. He *was* negative, but he couldn't seem to help it.

No, he amended with a faint smile, he was *positive* he was *negative*.

He ambled over to the ramshackle bookcase that all these stores along this little Santa Fe street — hardly more than a burro lane, really — seemed to have and scanned the titles. Most were in Spanish, which he didn't know despite having lived in New Mexico for over thirty years. He had avoided learning the language, although he didn't know why because he spoke German and French, and could make himself pretty well understood in Italian. Spanish should have come to him so easily. But he hadn't wanted to learn it, hadn't seen the need, despite working with Spanish-speaking men and women ever since he got out of college.

You're just being stubborn, his mother used to say. And she was

right.

Stubborn *and* negative, he thought, and wondered how anyone stood him.

He took a look around the store and saw some leather goods — boots and saddles mostly — in one section, some bright clothing hanging from a few racks, a chest that looked like it had numerous little perfume bottles on it, and all around the room stood case after case of jewellery.

If they ever outlawed jewellery in Santa Fe, the city would go belly-up, he thought. That's fairly uncharitable, he realized. He could add that to his long list of growing sins.

The autumn light filtered in through the dirty window and he felt warm standing in front of the bookcase. It was a comfortable feeling, and for a moment he didn't want to move, didn't want to do anything, and it was as if he'd gone into another dimension because he couldn't hear anyone, couldn't smell anything, not even the too-sweet perfumes and incense. It was just him and the bright sunshine, and—

'Jimmy, come look at this!'

The sound of his wife's voice was like the ripping of a membrane, and he shook himself, almost more a shudder. He left the mildewing tomes and headed across the room. At first he couldn't locate her, then he saw her standing at a counter. She was being waited on by an old man.

He became aware then that there were two girls — excuse me, he chided himself, that was *young women* these days — standing not far from Bev, pointing at something in the glass case; one was talking while the other giggled. He came up alongside his wife and smiled automatically. If he did anything else, she'd want to know what was wrong, and he would say nothing was wrong, but she wouldn't believe him, and they'd go back and forth like that until something *was* the matter.

'Look, Jimmy, aren't they great?' She dangled a pair of silver earrings from her fingers, while the clerk smiled expectantly at him. She was waiting, he knew, for his response. His *positive* response.

'They're nice, honey. Really nice.' Actually he thought they looked like a dozen or more other pairs of earrings she had pawed

through in the dozen or more other shops they'd stopped in today.

There you go exaggerating, his teachers said, that's very unprofessional and unnecessary.

These earrings, though, had inlaid turquoise in the silver triangles, and were pretty in an unflashy way. But still.

She was watching him, waiting for him to speak the magic words, although she hardly needed permission.

'Well, Bev, if you want them, go ahead and buy them.' His smile widened, and it seemed like his face was about to crack open. There, he'd said them. She had dozens of earrings in her jewellery cases, maybe more, and she had her own income and didn't need his permission to buy anything, but she always waited for him to say that.

She looked at the old man and shook her head. 'Not quite right. What else do you have?'

Jim never understood that, either. He said the so-called magic words, thinking she wanted to hear him say it was all right to buy whatever, and then she always put the item back. As if she no longer wanted it. He wondered what would happen if he didn't say go ahead and buy it/them/whatever. He wasn't sure that he wanted to find out, at least not now. This was, after all, their reconciliation trip.

For the next half hour Bev examined all the silver earrings in the three trays the old guy put up on the counter. She held one from each pair up to an ear and asked Jim for his opinion, and he smiled, his face now feeling frozen into that expression, and she'd sigh and put the earring down and pick up the next one. She went through a fourth tray, then decided to look at rings, trying each one on. The minutes ticked by, and Jim shifted from one foot to another. Behind him the warm sunshine tugged, and he wanted to stand there in the golden light and pretend to read the titles of the books even though he wasn't cold or anything, but he knew the minute he did, Bev would call to him.

And he would go to her, like an obedient dog.

He sighed.

The girls were still there, and now they were talking louder, or

maybe he was listening more carefully, and the brunette was examining a strand of pale coral called angel skin. It was more white than pink, and he'd never seen coral that colour. She was talking about how it was formed from the bodies of dead sea creatures. The other girl interrupted.

'You've got it all wrong, Trisha. Actually, you see, angels die, and their skins just sort of *slough* off and drift down from Heaven into the seas, and the coral forms from the skins.'

Next to him he sensed Bev crossing herself, and he felt a surge of annoyance at the gesture. She didn't go to church, hadn't been in one since before they got married — at least she couldn't blame him for that — but she still crossed herself. She still had her rosary, and he always wondered why, when she'd turned her back on the church when her faith seemed so strong. His faith had left him years ago; one day he had it, the next it was gone, and he hadn't stepped inside a church since, hadn't felt the need, didn't know why anyone did.

You just don't understand. That was Bev's voice, and his mother's, and maybe that girl back in high school, the one he had dated in junior year.

It occurred to him that all the little things that annoyed him about his wife were probably what bothered her about him. Only more so, since he'd been told enough by her and his parents and everyone else that he had numerous faults. Sometimes at night as he lay next to Bev and listened to her wheezy breaths he wondered why she had married him if he possessed all these character flaws. It wasn't like he'd changed radically after marriage. He was basically the same as when he got out of college. Marriage hadn't made him any better or any worse. He thought. He was sure there were others who could tell him different.

Maybe Bev was one of those women who see a flawed man as a challenge and think that once they've married him they can change him, as if he were so much clay to be moulded by her perfecting hands.

Or perhaps she liked the thrill of marrying a man so far from perfection.

Or maybe she married him, despite what everyone counselled her, because she was the type to defy everyone's good intentions.

Or maybe she just hadn't seen any of these flaws.

'Let me look at some coral,' Bev was saying now.

Well, there was white coral and red coral and blue coral, and God knows what other colours waiting in other velvet trays. Out of the corner of his eye Jim could see dust motes swirling in the rays still streaming through the window. They drifted downwards, and he remembered what the girl had said. Skins drifted downwards. He felt the pull of the light, and yawned lazily.

Of course, there were single strand necklaces, and double strands, as well as triple. There were smooth beads, hardly larger than the thread used to string them; there were chunks of coral, and there was the branch coral that looked like so many fingers and toes hardened into bizarre angles.

Bizarre angels, he thought, and chuckled aloud, then looked away as he saw the old man and Bev staring at him.

You always laugh at your own jokes, she had once accused him after they'd argued about God knows what, and he always wondered what kind of vice that was. If that was the worst he'd ever done. laugh at his own jokes…then…But unfortunately, it wasn't the worst of his sins. His sins were many. Sometimes they seemed to go on and on, page after page.

Sins of stubbornness, and negativity, and insensitivity, and pride. Could one be proud of the number of sins one carried around?

Probably.

Mea culpa.

'What do you think, Jimmy?'

'It's nice, hon,' he replied and realized he hadn't even looked. He stared down at the necklace she'd clasped around her neck, and he imagined his hands around her neck, and how it would feel. Her skin so warm beneath his, and he shifted from one foot to another, feeling the response in his body.

Swell. Add another sin to the list.

He moved closer and dropped a kiss on top of her head. Okay, that took care of the sin. She looked up at him, her thin lips pressed together, as if he'd goosed her or something.

'My hair. it'll get mussed,' she said.

Good God. He'd just kissed her; he hadn't vacuumed her damned scalp, and if you asked him, her hair always looked the same, no matter what she did to it, no matter what colour she dyed it, and why she always asked him—

No, he thought and blinked hard and turned around to look at the light. It was fading now, the sun having shifted since he'd last looked, and sadness enveloped him. He wanted to go stand there, and let the dust drift around him, like little skins, drifting downward ever so slowly, drifting, drifting. drifting.

'What do you think, senor?' the old man asked.

'What?'Jim turned around.

'The necklace,' Bev said, impatient that he hadn't been attending every nuance of the deal going on, and she thrust a strand at him.

He took the necklace, and it was as if something at once both hot and cold touched him; he stared down at the white coral and thought of skinned angels. He felt the warmth of their skins seeping out, the coldness of the water creeping in, saw the agonized looks, saw—

He shook his head.

'No?' Bev said. 'What about this?'

The next necklace thrust into his hands was a double strand of reddish coral, and he saw the blood swirling through the water, felt the coldness of the skins, and yet they were so soft, so pliant beneath his fingers, and he caressed the coral, and heard the screams, and he looked up to see the old man watching him intently.

'This is nice,' he said hoarsely, and the old man nodded as if he'd expected all along Jim to say that.

'I don't know,' Bev said. She grabbed another strand and put that into his hands, and now he had another soft buttery skin beneath his fingertips, and as he stroked the supple skins, he groaned inwardly.

'Well, Jimmy?'

'Well?' He stared at her, feeling befuddled. His senses had dulled, and he couldn't smell the intense perfumes and spices as he had before, couldn't hear much of anything as well, as if even the girls standing so close to him had stopped talking loudly and were now whispering.

He closed his eyes and thought about Bev and how their marriage was falling apart and how they didn't have the good sense to admit it, and how he wanted nothing more than to make the marriage… to make *something* in his life work, how he wanted to make everyone realize they were wrong when they said he was stubborn and negative and callous, and all he wanted, really, was to stand in the sunlight and be left alone and not be told that he was this or that, all of it bad.

When he opened his eyes again, he was standing in the warm sunlight, looking out the window. Outside he could see Bev crossing the street at the corner, and at her side, but one step behind, was a man that he dimly recognized, and it hit him after a vague minute that the man with Bev was *him*.

Jim tried to move, but couldn't. All he could do was stare out the window and feel the dust motes settling on him, like little dried-out angel skins, like the dried-out husk that he'd become, that Bev had turned him into.

He would have laughed, but he couldn't. Nor could he weep. All he could do was feel the sunlight, and realize that the underlying smell of the place hadn't been perfume or incense at all; it had been that of dusty dying souls.

* * *

Kathryn Ptacek lives in a 110-year-old Victorian house in New Jersey with her writer husband, Charles L. Grant, and is the author of numerous novels and short stories in the historical romance, horror and fantasy genres. She has edited three anthologies, including the highly acclaimed *Women of Darkness,* and she is also the editor of *The Gila Queen's Guide to Markets,* a regular newsletter for writers and artists. About 'Skinned Angels', Ptacek says: 'The incident with the two

young women and the coral necklace is true. Years ago when I still lived in Albuquerque, a friend and I drove up to Santa Fe and wandered through various stores around the Plaza. At one place, a woman showed us the necklace and said it was angel skin coral. I said, suddenly inspired, that it was formed from the skins of angels, which had sloughed off and drifted down into the ocean to form coral. Well, I grossed out the clerk and my friend (who was a Catholic and did cross herself). Years later I started to write a story about angels, but instead I remembered the coral necklace incident, and it all came together in “Skinned Angels”.’

The Windmill
CONRAD WILLIAMS

As they drove past the gutted skeleton of the Escort, Claire tensed.

'What's wrong?' asked Jonathan, easing off the accelerator.

'There was someone in that,' she said, twisting against her seat belt to look out of the back window. 'Stop. Go back.'

He shook his head. 'Will you stop messing about, Claire? I can never tell when you're being truthful. You should have been an actress.'

The car diminished. It was standing on its hubs — the tyres having melted — in a pool of oil. Claire squinted at the driver's side: a black shape was bolt upright in what remained of the seat.

She turned around.

Jonathan was fiddling with the tuner, trying to find some music. The only station that cropped up on the automatic search was a thin, scratchy hiss, punctuated by a slow *whump…whump* sound.

'Welcome to Radio Norfolk,' said Claire, trying to purge her mind of the images with which it was now taunting her. *Imagine: No lips. Just a gritted sheet of white. His fat oozing through the black shell of his skin to hang in yellowish loops, like cheap pizza cheese.*

The Fens reached out beyond the hedgerows muscling against the car, green fields splashed with red poppies and sprigs of purple lavender. Claire wound down the window and breathed deeply, trying to unwind. This was meant to be a relaxing weekend but already she felt that she had made errors. And that riled her.

'Norfolk? Why are you going to *Norfolk?'* they had asked her back at the office. She had felt the need to defend the place, even though the nearest she had ever been to the county was a day trip to Mablethorpe as a child.

'There's lots of unspoilt coastline,' she said. 'I want long, windswept beaches to walk along. And there's a stack of wildlife. Apparently.'

'You should try Suffolk instead,' a colleague, Gill, had said, almost desperately, while her deputy looked at her with an expression approaching pity.

Jonathan had suggested they go to Paris but she quashed that idea because she did not want to spend too much money. And anyway, what was the point of going away for a weekend to another busy, polluted city? But that was not strictly true. Her negativity had more to do with the fact that the break was Claire's baby: she wanted

to come up with the plan. Now, as they swept through mile after mile of flat, sunbleached land, she was beginning to wish that she had thought of Paris first. And she was also thinking of Jonathan's disappointment and the 'told you so' triumphs of her workmates once she got back.

Jonathan was aware of her frustration. He rubbed her leg. 'We'll stop for a drink, hey?' he said. 'Next pub we come to. We'll try some good old local brew.'

'There was someone in that fucking car,' she snapped, although she was already starting to doubt it herself.

'Fine,' he said, braking hard. 'Get out and go and save him.'

They sat in silence, the heat building. Claire strained for some sound to massage the barrier loose between them but none was forthcoming. They had not seen a car, a moving car, for an hour or so. The occasional, isolated buildings they had passed were gutted and crippled, the life seemingly sucked from their stone into the dun pastures that supported them.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I just — it's work, you know? It's been getting me down. I just want this weekend to be perfect. I need this break and maybe…maybe I've not realized that you need it just as much. You've driven all the way from London and.. ' she trailed off, lamely. Work excuses were crap, she knew that and so did he.

Jonathan did not say anything. He started the car and moved off.

'Put a tape on,' he said. 'Anything. I'm getting jumpy with all this bloody quiet.'

She dug for a cassette from the pile on the back seat. Most were hers, although there were one or two tapes from his past, recorded on blanks by ex-girlfriends and scribbled over with red kisses. Alexander O'Neal. Luther Vandross. He had some new stuff, Fugees and Skunk Anansie, but she could not get the irritation out of her where those older albums were concerned. It was not so much the music — it was shite, that went without saying — it was thoughts, while she listened to it, of what he had been up to. Why would you play Luther Vandross if you were not doing what he was singing about?

Her fingers settled on a Pavement album they both liked. The tension between them relaxed a little but Claire was glad to be able to point out a pub — it would be good to get out of the car and make the distance between them an optional matter.

'Where are we, navigator?'Jonathan asked, parking the car in the gravel forecourt. Behind them, a stone building with no discernible purpose was the only other sign of life around.

'Urn, Cockley Cley. Just south of Swaffham.'

'Right. Let's get refuelled. Hungry?'

A man wearing sunglasses and a padded Parka uncoiled from the

corner of a bench outside the pub, where he had been sunning himself. He snaked out a hand to the adjoining picnic table and withdrew a pallid sandwich from a paper bag. His flask was attached to a sling around his shoulder. Jonathan nodded as they walked by, but if the man reacted, Claire did not see it.

Inside, three men were hunched over their meals, whispering conspiratorially. A cold meat buffet under hotlights reminded Claire of a Pantone chart of greys. To their left, the lounge was empty: two men were sitting at the bar, exchanging lowing, long-vowelled words. Claire wanted to leave.

'Jonathan—'

The man facing her wore a shirt opened to his navel. His gut lolled there, a strip of sweat banding his sternum. His nose was a sickening chunk of discoloured flesh, bulbous and misshapen, hanging down almost to his top lip. She watched, fascinated and repulsed, as he dragged a handkerchief across it, threatening to smear it even further. It looked as though it was melting. His companion was dressed in a cheap suit with a purple shirt. His hair was greased back, one blade of it swung menacingly in front of his eyes. His grin was loose and slick with spit. She could see his dentures, behind the pitted white flaps of his lips, clacking loosely around his mouth.

She edged towards her boyfriend as the landlord appeared from behind a gingham curtain. She was conscious of movement behind his arm: a swift descent of something silver, a hacking noise. She backed into a chair and sat down.

'Pint of Flowers. And, er—' Jonathan looked at her and she saw a little boy lost. The men eating their lunch had looked up at his softly blunted northern tones. They looked confused, as if they ought to act upon this invasion but did not know what course to take.

'Glass of fresh orange,' she said, her voice too loud.

The landlord poured their drinks and took Jonathan's money. He had the look of a pathologically strict sergeant-major. His moustache and his accent were violently clipped. His eyes were an unpleasant blue.

They took their drinks outside and sat on the bench adjacent to the man with the flask. He was still eating. He gave them a cursory once-over and zipped his Parka closer to his throat.

'Jesus,' whispered Jonathan, downing half of his drink, 'Jesusing Christing piss.'

'Did you see that man's *nose?'* hissed Claire, fidgety with nervous excitement. She was close to guffawing. 'What do you think it was? Syphilis? Cancer?'

Jonathan polished off his pint. 'Demonic possession,' he said, standing. 'Drink that, bring it or leave it. We've been here seven

minutes too long.'

They spewed gravel getting out of the car park. Claire looked back and saw the sergeant-major step out of the door, his hand raised, a stricken look on his face.

Neither of them said anything until they hit the relative bustle of Swaffham. Even then, their relief could only manifest itself in gusts of laughter.

'I love you,' she said, surprising herself. It seemed easy to say after the minor trauma of the pub. It was a comfort.

'I love you, too,' he replied, although she had not meant it as a cue. 'I thought we were goners. I thought we were going to end up as part of a very disappointing Scotch *egg-'*

She laughed again and then suddenly felt like crying. Her upset was nebulous, there was no real reason for it, no rational reason. They had just been people, strange only because they were slightly more different to her than she was used to. Must be exhaustion. She closed her eyes and through the reddish dark of that unshareable interior, she immediately saw the measured sweep of a deeper blackness across her vision. She opened her eyes but there were no boringly equidistant trees to cast their shadows, no houses since Swaffham now lay behind them. She shut out the light again and yes, here it was, a slow black glide from the top of her eyes to the bottom. And again. And again. Again.

Her heartbeat then, she reasoned, not without some discomfort. But before she could offer any satisfying alternative, she was asleep.

She swam out of the dark, panicking that she would not grasp Jonathan's question and be able to answer it before he lost patience with her. But it was not a question, he was merely talking to himself, loud enough for her to infer that he was pissed off with her sleeping while he did all the work.

'Sea view, they said. A sea view at the hotel. Oh yes, certainly, if you've brought the Hubble telescope along with you.' He looked at her and she could tell why; both to check she was awake and that she appreciated his joke. God, he really could be a minor irritant sometimes. 'Wells-Next-The-Sea, they call this place,' he continued. 'Mmm, and my name's Jonathan-Two-Dicks-Chettle.'

'We're here then?' Claire stretched in her seat, and blinked against the afternoon sunshine. A clutch of beached boats seemed to cling to each other in the distance. Well beyond them, a silvery grey line — like a mirror seen edge on — marked the leading strip of the tide.

'Yes, arrival can usually be said to be on the cards when the driver is in parking mode. And hey! We're in a car park. Well done.

Super.'

'Oh shut up, Jon,' Claire sighed. Twin glints of light drew her gaze towards a range of thin trees forming a paltry windbreak against the sea's muscle. Someone was looking in their direction with a pair of binoculars.

'Birdwatchers,' Jonathan said, with a mock shudder. 'This place'll be crawling with them. Come on, let's go and christen our room.'

They checked into the B&B and were led up a grand staircase past mounted blunderbusses and badly stuffed sea-birds. Their room looked out on the car park but was only slightly higher up, giving a better view of the acres between the hotel and the sea. Jonathan pressed up against her while she took in the tangy air. She let him peel down her jeans and panties, take her from behind even though she was dry. His pleasure, transmitted into grunts and selfish stabs, did nothing for her, but it was better than arguing about sex. She wondered why she had agreed to this holiday as he withdrew and came on her buttocks. She wondered if, as he wiped himself against her, it was to prove to herself that she did not want him any more.

'Quick walk before dinner?' he said, tucking himself away and kissing the back of her head. 'I'll wait downstairs. See if they can recommend some good restaurants.'

She masturbated to a swift, shallow orgasm, then cleaned herself up and pulled on a pair of shorts. Jonathan was leaning against the door outside, absently sniffing his fingers. He looked at her, obviously irritated that he had had to wait so long, then motioned with his head and set off for the road before she had reached him. They followed its uneven surface towards the boats then struck out across the fields, past cement coloured cows with vicious horns and thick reeds nestled into a deep gulley just off the track they were walking.

The quick, unexpected smell of camomile pleased her, a scent she had always associated with long summer walks as a child with Dad through the woods behind their house. She would ask him where they were going and he would reply, 'The land of far beyond.' They never arrived, though she would soon lose her excitement of that unseen place in favour of his soft words as he told her about the plants and the buildings and the animals they saw. More often than not, she would end up being carried by him, too tired to walk, as twilight drew around them.

'What are you smiling at?'Jonathan asked.

'Sorry,' she said, reluctant to share her memory. He would probably only scoff. 'I thought this was a holiday. I thought I'd be able to smile without being invited.'

'Do you have to be such a snidey bitch all the time?'

'Only when I'm with you, lover.'

Violently quiet, they approached an expanse of mud. Riven with trenches and pits, its scarred surface stretched out towards the sea. At this landlocked end, dry, stunted plants sprouted from its surface sheen. The acrid smell of salt was accompanied by something excretive: oil bound up in its organic processes, farting silently through moist fissures.

'Jesus,' said Claire. 'Fucked if I'm wading through *that*'

'This holiday was your idea, kid,' Jonathan sang. 'We could have been sipping *anise* outside the Café de la Mairie by now.'

It took the best part of an hour to cross the flats, by which time they were hot and cross with the way the mud sucked their feet in easily enough but was reluctant to give them back without a fight. Eventually the land solidified and gave itself over to a tract of well-packed sand. They squelched towards a band of shallow water and rinsed their feet. At the other side, they headed towards the boats, parallel to the path they had taken. Two hundred yards away, a man with a dog collecting shellfish in a carrier bag cast featureless glances at them.

The journey back seemed free of obstacles and they were able to relax and enjoy the walk. The sea breeze flirted gently with them, taming the sun's heat. Claire was able to laugh at one point, at some lame crack or other that Jonathan came out with. She did not care. The water that they had crossed had broadened and it soon became apparent they would have to recross it to get back to their cottage. It seemed much deeper, with a fast-running spine.

'Shit,' Jonathan spat. 'We could swim it.'

'I'm not swimming anything. I've got my sunglasses on and money in my pockets. And my watch isn't waterproof.'

'And God fucking forbid you should smudge your fucking make-up!'

Claire flinched from his rage and inwardly threatened herself not to cry. She would not do that in front of him again. She was not happy with her silence — a mute response might only goad Jonathan further — but if she opened her mouth she would start bawling. She could not remember how their relationship had started. It was as passionless and inexorable as a driver picking up a hitch-hiker on the road.

While he judged the depth and keenness of the water, she watched the tide in the distance, creaming against the slate-coloured sand at a tempo to match the beat of her resentment towards him.

'I'm going to try this, try walking across. To show you. Then you'll be safe.'

Do I hate him? she challenged herself, bitter with her redundancy in this situation and angry that he should be illustrating her uselessness by making such a sacrifice. My hero. Suddenly she did not

care if he disappeared into the sand and drowned. She would not dive in to help him, she would not scream for assistance. She might just sit down on the sand here for a while and count the diminishing bubbles.

'Nah,' he said, waist-high in water, 'sand's giving way. Too dangerous for you.'

She gritted her teeth and looked back along the flow. She saw a place where it chuckled and frothed and padded over to it. Shallow land. She had skipped across to the other side while Jonathan was still struggling to free himself of the beach's suck. She had to turn away from him to conceal her laughter. He caught up to her, red and soaking.

'You might have told me, you twisted little cunt,' he hissed into her ear, and strode off.

She watched him, his prissy little steps. *Yes,* she thought*, yes I do.*

Shocked and hurt by his attack on her, more than she wanted to admit, Claire rinsed her feet in the sink while Jonathan languished in the bath. It seemed his good mood had revived somewhat in the twenty minutes it had taken them to return. His hand was gripping the head of his straining cock.

'Hey, baby,' he said, in a mock cowboy voice. 'Why don'cha mosey on over here 'n' milk my love udder.'

'Fuck off,' she muttered, leaving him to it.

She dressed and went downstairs. Ordered a drink from the bar. An hour later, Jonathan was with her. Her distress was a palpable thing, spinning out from her like barbed hooks: a blind, flailing defence against his insinuative cruelty. She felt subsumed by his personality, as if he were trying to ingest her. Maybe it was the drink, but she was convinced his feelings for her were as shy of respect and concern as she had suddenly come to realize hers were for him.

'Sorry about that whole "cunt" thing. Bit strong. You know I love you. What shall we have for dinner?'

She picked at a chicken and apricot pie while he polished off a bowl of mussels. 'Christ,' he said. 'This sea air! I'm knackered!' He looked at her hopefully.

'I'll stay down here for a while,' she said. 'I'm not ready for bed yet.'

He saluted and trotted upstairs. She swallowed hard. It seemed an age ago that she had been able to think of him as attractive and warm. As — God, had she *really?* — a potential life-partner.

She took a drink with some of the other tourists, middle-aged women in oatmeal coir jumpers and Rowan bags. They tolerated her presence, although she could tell she unnerved them for some reason. The landlady came in and lit the fire, asking everyone if they wanted

any brandy and she was going to start a game of whist if anyone was interested.

Claire bid everybody goodnight and went up to her room, the skin of her nape tightening when she heard the word 'blood' mentioned behind her, by one of the women. *Did you smell the strength of her blood?* She thought maybe that was what she had said.

Jonathan was snoring heavily. The TV was on, a late-night film with Stacey Keach. She switched it off and went to the bathroom where she undressed quietly. And stopped.

Her period had begun.

Did you smell the strength of her blood?

'Oh,' she said, feeling dizzy. 'Okay.' She cleaned herself, applied a sanitary towel and slipped into a pair of pyjamas. Stealthily, praying she would not wake Jonathan, who would read her clumsiness as a prompt for sex — or an argument — she climbed into bed and willed sleep into her bones before her mind could start mulling over the steady, sour creep of their relationship. She failed. She was awake as the full moon swung its mocking face into view, arcing a sorry path across the sky that might well have been an illustration of her own trajectory through darkness. Jonathan's ragged breathing ebbed and flowed in time with the tide of disaffection insistently eroding her from within.

As dawn broke, she managed to find sleep, although it was bitty, filled with moments of savagery and violence that were instantly forgettable even as they unfolded shockingly before her.

Gulls shrieking as they spun above the hotel awakened her. Jonathan had left a note on the pillow:

Did not want to wake you for breakfast — you were well out of it. Nipped out for a newspaper. Enjoy your toast. Love, J.

He had wrapped two pieces of wholemeal toast and marmalade in a napkin and left them by her bed. The gesture almost brought her back from the brink but she guessed he considered it a chore. *If he mentions it to me later,* she thought, *I'll know he's after a reward, a pat on the back. I'll know it's over.* She giggled a little when she thought the death of their relationship should come down to a few slices of Hovis but that was not really the case; it was just a tidy way to cap it all, a banal necessity to make the enormity of her realization more manageable.

An hour later, they were piling along the A149 coastal road, Jonathan singing loudly to a Placebo song. The sea swung in and away from them, lost to bluffs and mudflats before surprising Claire with its proximity. She did not like the sea here. It appeared lifeless and sly. Where it touched land, grey borders of scum had formed. It simply sat there, like a dull extension of the Norfolk coastline.

They pulled off the road for a cup of tea at a small café. While Jonathan argued with the proprietor, who was loath to accept a cheque under five pounds, Claire watched an old woman attempting to eat her Sunday lunch. Her hands shook so badly that she could not cut her meat; her cutlery spanked against the side of her plate like an alarm. The winding blades of an old-fashioned fan swooped above them all. Something about its movement unsettled Claire.

'Come on,' said Jonathan, imperiously. 'We'll have a drink when we get to Cley.' He turned to the café owner, who was now flanked by her waitresses, alerted by the fuss.

'Suck my dick, Fatso,' Jonathan said, and hurried away. Claire raised a placatory hand but the proprietor only looked saddened. The woman at the table raised her jerking head and showed Claire what she was chewing.

'Jon! How could you say that? How could you embarrass me like that?'

'Us Chettles do not suffer fools lightly, Claire. I'm not about to start now.'

She wanted to leave him, to just go home, but it was his car and she did not know where the nearest railway station was. Sheringham, probably, a good twenty miles away. She had not seen a bus or taxi since they were in Ely the day before yesterday.

'I don't feel as though I'm on holiday, Jon. I haven't been able to relax. All we've done is drive and argue. And I really needed this break.'

'Hey, it was your choice.'

'Oh, like it would have been different if we were in Paris?'

He was nodding. 'Paris is the city of romance. It's impossible to have an argument there.'

She snorted. 'There's a word for people like you. *Dumbfuck,* I think it is.'

He let that one go, but she could see his jaw clenching, his knuckles whitening on the wheel.

She saw the windmill first. It rose up from a coppice beyond a low range of roofs, its naked, motionless blades seeming to pin the sky into position. She pointed it out and Jonathan nodded, turning the car on to a gravel track. They crested a small humpback bridge over a stream choked by rushes. The windmill was white, tall and solid. Some of its windows were open; lace curtains wagged in the breeze.

Jonathan parked the car and got out without looking at Claire. He walked through the heavy wooden door at the windmill's base. Claire collected the bags and stood for a while, looking out towards the dunes. On the path, a cluster of birdspotters in brightly coloured

windcheaters alternated their focus between her and a clump of gorse. They surprised her because there was not a man in their midst. Occasionally, one of them would raise their binoculars and favour her with a brilliant stare. A woman in a fluorescent green beanie trotted further down the path and the others followed. Claire laughed. They looked intense and foolish.

At the door, she paused. She could not see anybody inside.

'Jon?'

There was a visitors' book open on a bureau next to a coffee cup. A small jar of lollipops on the windowsill had been discoloured by the sunlight. 'Hello?'

She left the bags by the door and headed towards the room to her left. The door was ajar; an old woman was turning back the covers on the bed.

'Oh, hello?' said Claire, raising her hand. The woman looked up and smiled.

'Hang on dear,' she said, fiddling with her ear. Claire saw she was wearing a hearing aid. 'I keep it turned off when I work. Nice to have silence every now and again.'

'My name's Claire? Claire Osman? I booked a double room for tonight.'

She moved past Claire and checked her name in the ledger. 'Yes. Room for two. Where's your partner?'

'He went in ahead of me.'

The old woman gave her an askance look before shuffling towards the other end of the room. She twisted the handle on the door at the end but it was securely locked.

'Nobody came in here, my love. Are you sure?'

'I'm certain!' Claire blurted. 'I saw him come in before me. He must have gone through that door.'

'Aye, if he was a spirit. That's the door to the windmill. It's always locked unless we have a party of schoolkids come around, or enthusiasts, you know.'

'The other guest room then. He must be joking with us.'

'There's someone already in that, my love.'

'He *must* be in there.' Claire felt sick. She would have been happy to see the back of Jonathan in any other circumstances but this was just too weird. Suddenly too final.

She pressed up close against the old woman's back when she disturbed the other guests, who were sorry they could not help, but no, they had not seen a soul in the past half hour. Claire felt her head filling with grey. She smelled Trebor mints and Earl Grey on the woman's cardigan. The next thing she was aware of, she was sitting on a high-backed wooden chair in the dining-room, her eyes fixed on a

cut-glass bowl filled with boxes of Kellogg's Variety packs. The old woman was holding Claire's hand. The other guests — a woman in a pair of khaki shorts and a fleece; a willowy woman in a track suit sucking vampirically at a cigarette — watched, concerned, from the corner of the room.

The latter introduced herself as Karen and looked as though she had smoked herself thin. The type of woman who hurried a meal, picked at it really, just so that she could have the cigarette afterwards. Claire wondered if that was the way she had sex too. She drew the smoke so deeply into her lungs that it was almost without colour when it returned.

Her partner, Brenda, offered to call the police and look around the dunes outside. 'The tide here is pretty innocuous but, you know, water is water.'

Claire sat in the room, looking at Jonathan's travel bag. It had not been zipped up properly; a corner of his Bolton Wanderers flannel was sticking out of it. Two WPCs arrived. She told them what she knew, which was nothing. They made notes anyway. Checked the car. Told her to relax and there would be someone to talk to her in the morning. Best not to go anywhere tonight. In case Jonathan should return.

'He's got the car keys anyway,' she said. The policewomen laughed, although she had not meant it as a joke.

She watched them go back to their car. They talked to the old woman for a while, one of the policewomen turning to look at her through the window for a few seconds.

She ate with the other couple at the ridiculously large dining table, Brenda quick to let her know what a sacrifice this was as they had aimed to go to the Red Lion in Upper Sheringham for food. Karen puffed before and after courses and during mouthfuls. Her cheeks seemed permanently hollowed.

'Has he ever done this before?' she asked.

Claire started to cry through her food, something she had not done since her childhood. She had forgotten how hard it was to eat and cry at the same time.

'I can't talk. I'm sorry.' She left them and went to her room. She drew a hot bath and soaked for twenty minutes, tensed for his knock at the door and his impatient, stabbing voice. She never realized she would miss him so much.

Later, she watched the dark creep into the sky. Mars clung, a diamond barnacle, to the underside of a raft of cloud. The birdspotters were still out there, a mass of coloured Kangol clothing and Zeiss lenses. There was even a tripod. Cows stood in a far-off field like plastic toys.

Pale light went on outside. A soft-looking girl carrying a hose

slowly drifted around the perimeter of the windmill's grounds wetting the plants and the lawn. An overweight dog ambled alongside her. Claire listened to the fizz of electricity until it calmed to a dull murmur and then went to bed.

Sleep claimed her quickly, despite her loneliness and the alien posture of the low-slung room. Her dreams were edgy, filled with vertiginous angles and lurid colours, as though she were a film director trying too hard. She was in a car too big for the road, ploughing through a village where there were no men. She was heading towards a windmill in the distance that did not seem to get any closer. Occasionally she would drive over some indistinct shape in her path. Before long, the roadkill became larger. Some of it wore clothes. It did not impede her progress; she drove straight over it.

whump. whump. whump

Shanks of flesh squirted up on to the windscreen. The engine whined as it bounded through the bodies.

whump. whump. whump

Awake. Grainy blackness separated into the lumpen shapes of furniture and pictures on the wall. Imperfect light kissed at the curtains, turning them into powdery tablets.

'Jonathan,' she whispered, softly, hopefully.

whump. whump

A deep creaking noise punctuated that heavy sound. The window filled with black, then cleared again after an age. Blackness once more. Then soft light.

She opened the curtain. A blade of the windmill swung past her, trailing ragged edges of its sail. Down towards the end of the lawn, a huddle of people sat, a pinkish mass in the gloaming. Were they having a midnight party? Why had she not been invited? Maybe they wanted to leave her to her grief.

She shrugged herself into her towelling robe and picked her way through the shadows to the main door. The air was warm, pungent with salt. She followed the path around to the garden, stepping through an arch crowded with roses. The windmill creaked and thudded, underlit by strange, granular arcs from lamps buried in the soil.

She was halfway across the lawn when she saw the women were naked. They were surrounding something, dipping towards it and moving away. She recognized the young girl who had watered the lawn, the old woman and Karen, who was lying back, cigarette in one hand, Brenda's thigh in the other. Brenda was talking to some other women. Claire realized she had not seen a man since the pub in Cockley Cley. The sergeant-major bustling out of the door. Holding up

his hand. Mouthing something.

whump. whump.

The windmill had not borne sails when they arrived that morning. She took another, hesitant step forward when she was spotted. One of the policewomen pointed at her. They all turned to look, peeling away from the dark, wet core of their interest. She saw their bodies were smeared with blood. The old woman wore feral slashes of deep red across her forehead and neck.

Claire felt a slow, hot release against her thigh as she turned to look at the blades of the windmill, wrapped in the still wet hide of her boyfriend. Turning back to the women, who were advancing towards her now, she reached beneath the folds of her robe, sank her fingers into her own blood and began to paint.

* * *

Conrad Williams confesses that his first attempt at fiction had a Tyrannosaurus Rex eat a village of prehistoric people. He adds in mild defence that his favourite films at the time starred Doug McClure. Moving on, he has won the British Fantasy Award for Best Newcomer and his work has been published in many small press and professional publications. Recently his short fiction has appeared in *The Mammoth Book of Dracula, Sunk Island Review, AbeSea* and *Dark Terrors 2*. Upcoming is a story in Ellen Datlow's *Sirens and Other Daemon Lovers*. '"The Windmill" came to me during a sleepless night in a windmill on the Norfolk coast last year,' reveals Williams. 'Almost all the events in the story really happened. When I got to the Fens, it felt like I was part of a Miserablist film, something that grew from the same rotten tap root as *The Wicker Man* and *Deliverance*. Something naive and parochial, but which simmered with hideous possibilities. I reckon this is the nastiest story I've ever written,' adds the author.

Sharp Edges
STEVE RASNIC TEM

In such an intense physical act like murder, between the victim and the murderer there is something sensual…the death orgasm and the sexual one.

Dario Argento

Jane spent hours shaving her legs, despite the fact that the act tangled her in anxiety. Even in her nervousness, however, the results never failed to fascinate: the warm pink smoothness of the legs, the skin scraped so thin one might have seen the blood pulsing just beneath the surface. Then there were the occasional nicks: in particular the granular abrasions around the heel and ankle, where the skin came so close to the bone it appeared painted on. When first cut open her pale skin pinkened, as if suffused with a new liveliness, then the tiny beads of blood oozed out on to the surface, and Jane found the look and smell of them oddly comforting, like milk for a baby, confirming for her that this life was, indeed, real. Although beneath the surface pleasure a profound terror lurked.

Jane had many such terrors, and her psychotherapist believed that if she faced the smallest among them first, the grip of her more dramatic fears might begin to loosen. She wasn't sure about this, but would never think of arguing with him. Besides, shaving her legs was important to her appearance.

So when she shaved with the razor she held her breath. It steadied her hand. But there were still the inevitable slips, the skin torn, the pale flesh of the calf washed with a translucent spread of blood. She'd gasp and run to the mirror: staring eyes dilating rapidly in the high polish of the glass. And each time, behind her in the clouds of steam from the shower, she could see the knife blade easing aside the crisp plastic curtain.

Maxwell sawed carefully through the hollow handle of the cane, inserting the narrow knife in one opening and carving out the other end to create a close, smooth-fitting sheath for the blade. He supposed you could purchase such a device, but he felt more comfortable making his own. He doubted his particular version could kill, but killing wasn't what he was after with this instrument. It was intended merely to probe, to produce seemingly accidental scratches, evidence

of all the sharp edges a young lady might discover in the standard urban environment.

In the park, conveniently crowded that afternoon, he created a long vertical tear in a young woman's calf as she passed him jogging. Because of her exertions, the shrouding effect of oxygen depletion, he imagined it was several seconds before she felt the pain and by then he was safely around the bend and stepping briskly down another pathway.

In the local supermarket, obscured behind an elaborate tropical fruit display, he was able to spear a much larger woman in her left buttock. He left the store halfway through a long harangue as she threatened the manager and anyone else in view with legal action. Maxwell had been pleased by the symmetry of the blood stain flowering across the back of her dress.

In similar fashion he continued into the evening, poking, prodding, raising the vaguest signature of blood on women of all ages. Although his escape was uncomfortably narrow at times, he felt no real threat to himself during these activities, for he was simply playing the flirtatious tease, the bashful lover. He was seeing who bled and who did not, and how much. Later, much later, and after extensive courtship, he might open their many mouths for a bright red kiss. But such revelations had to be approached slowly. He had always understood that women were shy creatures, reluctant to give up their secrets, which made what they withheld all the more important. Women were men's complement, their supplement, their completion and their explanation. Open up a woman and you might finally know her, and find the missing pieces of yourself.

Maxwell had left his special cane in the car during dinner at Catalina's, a local restaurant sporting an atypical European diner theme, when he saw the young woman he would soon know as Jane enter and take a booth a few feet away. As was his habit, he looked to her fingers first, which were a brighter pink near their ends than on the shafts, with very little nail. He assumed she must chew on her fingers to an obsessive degree, and later observations only confirmed this. He would often wonder during their ensuing relationship whether her fingers bled much, and if she sucked this blood, and whether she waited for a large amount to well up before licking, or sucked her fingers constantly, taking the blood before it had the opportunity to stain her pale skin.

Although there was nothing particularly dazzling about this young woman in her twenties, she had a pleasant face, long reddish-brown hair which was immanently touchable, and people *noticed* her. He had no immediate explanation for this, but patrons turned their heads when she entered, looked up at her and smiled, and invariably

she smiled back, even to the scruffiest of diners. This was dangerous behaviour on her part, he concluded after watching these exchanges for several minutes. Obviously people could see that she was the sort of person who would sit down next to a Charles Manson to chat if a Charles Manson were only to smile at her with even vague politeness. She had this pitiable need to *please* everyone she met. She was soft, vulnerable, a pale Riding Hood in the woods. She was the kind who walked barefoot on a beach strewn with broken glass, not out of bravery or even foolishness really, but simply out of a sense that *this is the way one behaves,* however wrong-headed her senses might be. Maxwell was immediately drawn to her.

The music in the restaurant was high-pitched, discordant. For some time Jane had intended to eat here — it was only a few blocks from her apartment building. Now she was sorry she'd ever set foot in the place, but lacked the will to turn around and leave. What would people think if she did such a thing? People smiled at her, their eyes reddened by the harsh, crimson neon that was a major component of the decor, neon in primary greens and blues casting mutant shadows around their hunched forms. Some colours might have been surgically removed from the spectrum here: yellow, orange, other tones she couldn't quite put her finger on, making flesh tones darker than they should be, shadows deeper, the air thicker. The acoustics in the restaurant could not have been more harsh. A loud, screaming song underlaid with raspy, asthmatic whispering filled her head. She kept smiling, as if to distract her face's need to wince from the pain.

She sat where the blank-faced host directed her, only his teeth gleaming in his dark blue and green face. He led her through a series of patios, past several sets of sliding doors with knife-like edges. Her silverware looked wrong, as if designed for a slightly different species of human being. She sorted through the eating utensils looking for familiar instruments as the music rose to a bleeding screech in the background.

Bright red and green clouds of light descended around the table. Softer whispers swarmed out of the night, drawn into the bright colours. A man in a dapper dark suit rose at a table a few feet away and began making his way towards her. Nearing her, he looked down and smiled. He leaned over. And stole the knife from beside her plate, slipping it into his coat pocket. She was too shocked and embarrassed to say anything. He grinned a sharp-toothed grin and leaned closer. She imagined she could smell the blood welling to the surface of his warm, pink tongue. He clicked his teeth as if he was going to bite her. Her teeth sawed on the inner surface of her lower lip. His tongue was like a snake's. Her face suffused with heat so quickly she thought she

might faint. She closed her eyes. And felt the caress of a blade gliding up her upper arm and slipping just under the edge of her short sleeve, pausing there to tease before turning and gliding out again. She did not realize he had cut her until the sharp stinging began that snatched her breath away. When she opened her eyes again the man was gone.

In the car Maxwell fingered the edge of the table knife. A session with the whetstone would make it much keener. He brought it up to his nose and sniffed: the rusty bouquet of blood, mingled with perfume reminiscent of lilacs, and a heady, day-old sweat. This was his first gift from her, but he knew there would be many others. And he had many gifts for her as well. She was so naive, so. uninformed. She did not know, yet, that human bodies were thin-walled, fragile, prone to leaks, vulnerable to even the mildest prick from earrings, the rough edge of a necklace, the awkward slip of a comb. A few cuts across the eyeballs would make her see the things she always ignored.

He waited until she left the restaurant, then followed her to her building. The angular trees outside the entrance provided him with cover while he observed which of the mailboxes just inside the door she opened for her mail. A quick peek at the box after she'd gone upstairs, and he knew her exact name and address.

Jane worked as an entry-level secretary in a large corporate law office downtown. It was a job which did little to alter her basic anxiety at being in the world. People were so demanding there, so difficult to satisfy. Every day she felt like more of a failure, less able to please the people she worked for and the people she worked with. She didn't understand what they wanted from her. She didn't know what she had to do to get them to like her.

She might have enjoyed her job more if it hadn't been for all the paper cuts she kept getting, criss-crossing her fingertips in delicate, almost beautiful patterns. Their number increased with her fatigue, certainly, but there were days in which sharp edges seemed intent on her, lying in wait on tabletops, in letter trays, and in her desk drawers.

'Jane! Watch out!'

Jane screamed once in shock and pain. The dangling earring on her left side had caught in the file drawer, pulled through the hole, ripped through the ear. The file room went dark, highlighted in shades of red.

Someone had put a pillow under her head. The whispers of her co-workers grew harsh and garbled above her. They seemed to rise and fall in volume with her pain, eventually blending into an overwhelming, physically-based melody.

A man in a bright blue coat crouched over her. His smile was too

broad and thin to be natural. She was embarrassed to have him see her like this. She worried about her dress, her hair. He held up a syringe as if measuring it with his eyes.

As if on its own the needle reached out and pricked her.

The needle was so thin it became invisible as it entered her flesh. If all edges were so very sharp perhaps she wouldn't have minded. She wondered with the pleasant vagueness of dream if sunlight had such a supernormally sharp edge, if in fact it stabbed you to release your darker colours.

She fantasized asking one of her friends in the office to drive her home, but then realized she didn't have any friends.

At home she lay back into her pillows and stared out the window which pressed against the side of her bed. Her ear was covered by a small oval bandage like a cap. These clear glass panes were her only safe windows to the world. And yet if they were to break she'd surely slash her throat on their edges.

Altogether the room felt less safe than at any time she could remember. Shadows in the room seemed somehow keener than they should have been, even when cast by soft, rounded objects such as pillows and bed corners. She dozed off and on, and every time she opened her eyes the room felt sharper-edged. The surfaces of the pillows were dusty, grittier with each new awakening. She turned her head: angular edges of ceiling littered their primary-coloured cases. She glanced up: cracks in the ceiling, edges peeling, falling.

A hard, rhythmic scraping was working its way through the bed and into successive layers of her skin. She glanced down at her hands: her fingers frustrated, attempting to rip the sheets with her chewed-away nails.

The sudden screech of the doorbell cut through the thick bedroom air. She staggered into her robe and down the stairs. Her ear felt wet, as if it had started bleeding again, but when she raised her hand to the stiff bandage her fingers came away dry.

She became acutely aware of small details as she passed through her apartment: the triangular pattern on the dishes, the swirling topography left by the vacuum in the rug, the coloured bits in a teddy bear's glass eye. After a long day away she focused on such things with every return trip to her apartment, but this afternoon they seemed to be demanding increased attention.

On the other side of the door was a man in a cap, a bundle in his arms. The peephole brought her a reassuring slice of him: bland, sunshiny, smiling face, a florist's symbol on the cap, a bundle of flowers in his hand. She opened the door a minimal amount. 'Miss Jane Akers?' She nodded, and took the flowers.

It was after she closed the door firmly behind her that she felt the pricking around the stems, and discovered that sharp wire bound the flower arrangement together, short sections of it twisted together as on a barbed wire fence. Her fingers grew sticky where they'd been punctured; juice from the stems made them sting. There was no card.

She thought she heard a throaty whispering in the apartment which disappeared every time she tried to focus on it. But for several weeks there had been a continuous thread of barely detectable whispering, murmured beneath taped music, within the background static of phone conversations, between the lines of television commercials, so to hear it today, after so much trauma, should not have been surprising.

She didn't want the flowers — she despised them. But she couldn't just throw them in the trash. You weren't supposed to throw flowers away; you were supposed to put them in water. So she did. She wondered if the barbed wire would rust. Feeling she could not stay here another minute she got on her coat and opened the door, intent on walking out of her anxiety.

Maxwell watched the florist's van pull away from the front of her apartment building. It had been easy enough to find a young man eager to make the extra money, without asking embarrassing questions. Maxwell had stood by the outside door and witnessed the entire transaction, and had been touched by the way she'd pulled the flowers into her arms so desperately, as if starved for affection. It made him love her even more.

She was shy, yet eager for love — he could sense this about her. She was his discovery. He was sure he could make contact with a woman like this — he was convinced she was reachable, unlike so many other women who frightened him. He could make contact — if not with his heart, then with his knife.

Now she was leaving the building, walking briskly down the street, her chin pushed forward as if in defiance. He smiled and checked the Polaroid camera on the seat beside him, the extra film cartridges in the box beside it. He started the car.

Jane had no particular destination in mind, but she would know where she was going when she got there. She stared at the far away trees, the grey outlines of buildings reaching into the dark city mists. On the face of a distant tower giant clock hands sliced through the heavy air, releasing its toll like a damp explosion.

She passed a black metal fence, its vertical bars spinning by her like film frames. The sharp points along the top of the wrought iron leaned in her direction, aiming at her soft flesh.

People lounged along the edges of the sidewalk and on the grassy verge of the park spreading out in front of her. Were they waiting for her? Their noses showed the sharp profile of cartilage. Their jaws were blades, their chins the points. They stared at her with their thin, sharp smiles. She wanted to say something that would make them like her, but she didn't know the right words.

A lizard crawled out of the grass directly in front of her, as if to divert her attention. She thought of stepping on its back, shuddered, and moved away from it.

At the north gate of the park a man had set up a table and was selling brushes and combs. A succession of combs lined a tray covered with black velvet. He grinned at her as he brushed his fingers across their fine teeth. 'A lovely comb for the lovely lady?'

He scared her, but it would be rude to hurry past. 'They're so pretty,' she said, looking down at the pitiful selection. 'How much is that one?' she asked, pointing to the cleanest-looking one.

'For *you,* a buck.'

She gave him a dollar at the end of trembling fingers. He touched the dollar, but then his whole hand moved up to clutch her arm. 'Such a *pretty* girl.' She smiled nervously, on the verge of tears. She wanted to scream, but what if he was really nice? He bent down and kissed her fingers with lips that felt slick and oily. 'Have a nice day,' he said, letting go of her arm and handing her the comb. She made herself smile again, then walked away, rubbing the back of her hand on her coat, trying to wipe away the feel of his lips.

She approached a row of storefronts. Soft explosions of brilliant light occurred behind her, but when she turned around there was nothing there. She looked up at the sky: dark clouds were piling one atop the other, their edges rubbed shiny where lightning had gathered.

She looked into the window of a hardware store: an axe, shovel, shears. Then several clothing boutiques: black gloves, black lace. Sexless beings dressed completely in black: hats, gloves, black leather coats.

She imagined she could hear the sounds of zippers snagging flesh from deep inside these shops, the customers weeping softly.

She was vaguely aware of someone taking photos of her, but when she turned around no one was there.

She had to step over an old man in dark glasses, lying with his German shepherd, both of them sprawled across the middle of the sidewalk. The old man's cane came up, pointing at her like an arrow. The dog turned and bared its teeth, then lunged for the pasty flesh of the man's wrinkled hand. The man yelled. Blood sprayed in a mist across the sidewalk.

She looked past the wounded man at another man standing in a doorway. His damp lips. His glistening eyes watching her. His hands clutching, as if they held the stolen tableknife. But she knew this wasn't the same man.

Thunder crashed behind her. For a second the city skyline appeared to be on fire, a giant camera scorching it as picture after picture was taken. Rain began, then suddenly became a downpour.

Even through the heavy rain she could see them all staring at her. Jane found sanctuary beneath a large store awning. On the other side of the glass an elderly woman was cutting shapes out of black paper, demonstrating silhouette portraiture. Jane thought she recognized the profile the old woman was working on as her own.

The woman looked up, gasping as she peered into Jane's face. The scissors slipped and cut through the face of the silhouette.

Jane ran back out into the rain. Music crashed inside her head. The storm sounded like the same music. She gazed past the grey buildings, searching, intent on returning to her apartment. The rain slackened some. She entered the park. Blades of leaves, blades of grass. Children had gathered by the north gate and were playing with a lizard. There was no sign of the man selling combs. Another bright, soft explosion, but Jane didn't bother to look up this time. She gazed more closely at the children. Their lizard wriggled madly, nailed through its neck to a board. She suddenly burned hot with shame.

The centrepiece of the park was an arrangement of giant metal sculptures with razor-thin planes, broad fields of metal. At first glance the sculptures appeared curvilinear, but closer examination revealed hidden points, sharp edges residing within the folds of illusory soft steel and brass.

She ran past the sculptures as another bright flash almost blinded her, and suddenly a pigeon was flapping at her side, caught on the huge button of her coat sleeve. Its claws came out and dug a ridge into the flesh covering the back of her hand.

She finally shook the bird loose, crying loudly as it pecked her. No one came to her aid. The world was full of too many sharp edges. It was pointless to get too deeply involved. You risked your own death. She ran the few remaining blocks, the rain beating the blood away as it struggled to escape her cuts.

She slammed the apartment door behind her. Someone had dropped a shiny, brightly-coloured magazine through her mail slot. She picked it up. Inside, nude photos of women had been scored horizontally repeatedly with a razorblade, turning their flesh into Venetian blinds.

Maxwell used up all his film, and he would have loved to have

had several more packs. The passion in her face as she ran away from the man with the cane, the trapped bird — he would have given anything to have had such passion directed at him. He loved her more with each stolen glimpse of intense emotion. He hoped the magazine he had left for her demonstrated just how much she made him feel, how badly he wanted to reach her, make contact, and banish his loneliness for ever.

When Jane threw the magazine to the floor a note fell from its pages. She ripped the envelope open frantically, jerking the folded letter out with shaking fingers. His handwriting consisted of thin, jagged uprights, virtually unreadable. *Love. sharp. you. reach:* these were the only words she could make out.

A crashing in the alley. Garbage can lids banged out a crazed musical. She crept to the back door that led to the fire escape and pulled it open. The alley was silent, empty.

She closed the door and turned back into the hallway which ran the length of her apartment. She stepped on something soft and pliant. She reached down and picked up the worn leather glove. A man's glove: who was responsible for it? It was stained here and there a dark colour, a shade of red like ancient rust.

Bright neon from the hotel sign outside the window at the end of the hall washed the walls a more brilliant red. At the end of the hall the tall curtains on either side of the window swept the floor, gliding in and out as if the window were a mouth, breathing. She knew there were sharp blades behind the billowing curtains, an erect penis behind the soft gabardine swaddling the crotch of the man who might be hiding-there.

She could not stay here any longer. In her make-up mirror she paid particular attention to the jagged patterns in her eyes, but no cosmetic could smooth these. It was all a part of being in the world, she supposed, but now she did not know if she wanted to be a part of the world or not. She glanced at her clock: impossibly, it said she had been back in her apartment for hours.

She finally gave up on returning a semblance of normalcy to her face, put on her coat again, and left her apartment to go see a movie. At least she could be assured that in the movie theatre, *nothing* is real.

Maxwell wondered if Jane had read his note yet, if she had glanced through his magazine, if she had discovered his intentionally dropped glove. Simple things, but they had the power to agitate the imagination of those vulnerable enough to suggestion. The innocent knew that the world was a dangerous place, but they were incapable of fully appreciating the implications.

In the two hours since he had left Jane's apartment he had been quite busy. The close proximity of her things had aroused him so he immediately went out looking for a substitute for her.

The woman hadn't wanted to return home with him, but it never ceased to amaze him how easily obstacles could be got rid of by means of a simple act of murder.

He enjoyed dancing. It was the only time he could hold a live woman with safety. But death made this one an even better dancing partner than he was used to. He had to tie her body to his waist and legs, but once this had been accomplished she followed him perfectly, now and then rolling her head on to his shoulder in affection. A pity he was already taken.

He hadn't caught her name before, but he preferred making up his own names anyway. 'Janice,' for this one, as she was to be Jane's substitute for the moment. With the wound in her face Janice was completely possessable: a marred masterpiece, a 'second' available for a reduced price, reduced effort. But she remained a great work of art for all that.

As the music rose to a crescendo he recalled the moments of Janice's creation: how he had heard her heart in his head, beating, struggling to escape the point of his knife (but not Jane's knife — he would never betray Jane in that fashion), how again and again he had thrust the point into the centre of her beating, until the sound had faded from his head.

She had struggled, but all too briefly. She had kicked a bit; as if in a dream he had felt her high heels puncturing his flesh, marking him in subtle and not-so-subtle ways.

Now the dance was over. The music ran down. Maxwell grasped the knife handle still protruding from Janice's chest. He pulled down on the knife. Her flesh split like rotted silk. He gasped with pleasure as the blade sliced through blouse, slip, skin.

He gasped again and again, louder than the music screaming in his head.

As she walked to the movie the passers-by whispered amongst themselves, too loudly for comfort, in fact far more loudly than was possible.

She might have gone to the police, but what could she tell them? She'd received a garbled note, a damaged magazine, and someone had lost a glove, someone had stolen a knife from a local restaurant. Her co-workers would be questioned, and they would talk about how nervous 'Poor Jane' had always been, how high-strung, how no one in the office really liked her. She would be embarrassed in front of the police; they would be disappointed in her.

She put on her glasses before entering the movie, intending to wear them for the rest of the night. She'd always felt protected behind the thick lenses. Even when she witnessed something terrible — a workman's hand slashed open on a dagger of glass, a young boy stabbed just above the groin in a schoolyard fight — she felt shielded by that thickness from the full weight of these incidents. They could not touch her on the other side of the glass. The images would not adhere to the filmy surface of her eyes.

But there was also this accompanying sense of danger: glass that so shielded her might break if the images came too close.

The theatre darkened; the previews came up with amplified colour and volume. What little light remained reflected off all the sharp edges hidden in the theatre. A few minutes into the movie she realized she had seen it before, but she knew she wouldn't be watching the screen anyway. Instead she gazed at the backs of people's heads, the placement of their arms on companions' shoulders, their small open displays of affection, and observed how they reacted to the murders taking place on the screen. Maxwell had always enjoyed the company of mannequins. So intent on looking a certain way for their male customers, they did not speak back. He envied their makers.

He bundled Janice, the mannequin he had created, into a bag and brought her back to Jane's apartment during the movie — he had passed Jane on the way over, and followed her until he was sure of her destination. If he worked quickly, he knew he could be outside the movie theatre when the film ended.

The lock on the apartment door had jimmied easily. Poor, naive Jane. Her lack of informed caution filled him with a renewed tenderness towards her. On the bed, blood dripped down the mannequin's arm, paused in the openness of the relaxed palm, then leapt from the forefinger to the carpet below.

He took the Polaroids he had made of Jane and spread them carefully across her dining-room table. He laid one against the other, matching patterns, shadows, stances, expressions. He permitted one image of her to kiss another image of her. His fingers lingered over her glossy surfaces. He meditated on the silkiness of her image. He took a pair of scissors from the drawer and laid one blade across a photograph, bisecting her face. He moved the blades together until her head disappeared. He raised one of the photographs, poised the twin points of the scissors over the image of her breasts, and pierced them simultaneously with one quick jab. He then began cutting through each of the photographs, disassembling each image of her until he had a large pile of shiny pieces. A bottle of bright red nail polish, retrieved from her dressing table, sat poised on the edge of her

fragmented poses. He took this and began painting the pile of clippings with red swirls, arrows and bright red hearts.

He picked up a meat cleaver from her kitchen counter and used it to dismember the graceful lines of the bedstead, the side table, the dresser. He slashed through the bed clothes and started on the contents of her closet. He arranged the mannequin within the destroyed womb of her bed, then began hacking on it as well, imprinting it with all his secret signatures. Then seeing himself in the mirror of the dressing table, the glittering blade in his upraised hand, he started smashing his own image in the mirror.

Jane felt a heightened self-consciousness leaving the movie theatre. She thought they must see her awkwardness, the wrongness in her. The crowd seemed subdued, as was often the case when people departed this sort of entertainment, as they attempted to extricate their thoughts and eyes from the webs and tendrils of fantasy. She felt as if she herself were too well-defined today, her terror too palpable against the crowd's backdrop of oh-so-grey emotion. It made her too-involved, vulnerable, an easy target.

A dark murmuring in the crowd off to her left, but Jane was determined not to look. She and the others around her crunched through powdered glass on the sidewalk, no doubt the remains of some wino's refreshment.

Soon she was at the edge of the park, an unusually bright streetlight mounted on the entrance above her. The sharp edges of light dropped painfully through the narrow, dark tree branches. In the distance, she could see women running away from the park. Beyond the sharp sculptures, Jane thought she could hear women screaming in windows.

He saw her stumbling through the park towards him, drawn along like a fly in the web of his personality, her face contorted as if from some massive, internal noise. He enjoyed the feel of insects blown against his skin, scratching across his arms and face, dancing. He withdrew the tableknife from his pocket, its blade sharpened to a thin blue edge. He stroked it slowly, ready to make contact, ready to make love to her.

Jane saw him standing in front of the sculptures, their metal edges surrounded by clouds of dark insects as they attempted to tear holes in the sky. People were fleeing the park. Why was she just standing there? It was the dapper older man from the restaurant, the one who had stolen her tableknife, the one who had been pursuing her. She wondered if perhaps a kiss, or even just a hug, might satisfy

him and make him leave her alone.

His teeth gleamed. She turned and ran. Away from her apartment, away from the park, and as he pursued her, running ahead of her here, heading her off there, she realized she could only go where he wanted her to go.

She ran down an alley with the man pacing steadily behind her. She barked her left knee against a torn metal drum; dampness spread rapidly down her leg. Cats scattered madly as she escaped the alley, as she crossed one street and then another, as she entered a shattered block of buildings, all condemned for the cinema complex to be erected there soon, a third of the buildings already gnawed into submission by the parked machinery.

She made her way through the jumbles of debris which filled the ruins, tormented by wood splinters and insect bites. Nails protruded from raw wounds in the wood, anxious to match their scars with her own.

She stopped, staring into the night in front of her. Suddenly his eyes peered from two holes carved out of the darkness. She spun right and broke through a flimsy door, into a building with dim yellow lights in its cracked windows, the only such lighting on the block.

Mannequins littered the hallway. Pieces of clothing hung from scattered plastic arms and heads. A battered hat. A leather glove. A red rain coat. A stocking mask.

She ran through an open door, into a bedroom. Several lamps affixed with coloured bulbs burned before a mirror on the large dressing table. A cat moved listlessly across piles of broken plaster towards her. It seemed to have unusually short hair; then she realized it had been shaved down to tissue-thin skin. Under the coloured lights the shaved cat's skin looked blood-red. She leaned over and stroked it — it was too drugged to purr. She could see veins labouring just under the surface of the skin. A diagram had been drawn in black permanent marker under its torso, like a butcher's chart.

Four naked cats lay near the dusty red bed (a bed for lovers, she thought), their tiny throats cut.

And then she heard him out in the hallway, whispering his love for her.

She crashed through the next door into an old kitchen with its piles of rusted silverware and broken plates and cups — smeared with dark, blood-like stains — littering the grey linoleum floor. Her feet, now bare, scraped across the shattered edges. The walls echoed complexly. She imagined them riddled with secret doors and passages, but more likely it was the effects of generations of rot.

She passed through another door into a hall slightly more barren than the first. Most of the ceiling bulbs in the hall were broken, their

curved jigsaw pieces crunching under her bare feet like deadly eggshells, barbed edges gleaming under the remaining yellow light.

A loud noise behind her and she fell into agony. She scrambled up and stared at her left arm: a sharp shaft of bone jutted from her broken skin.

She leapt back across the hall and slammed the door into the kitchen, painfully turning the old-fashioned latch. A knife blade suddenly appeared in the crack between the door and the jamb, working its way down towards the latch. The man laughed softly, whispering love songs as he worked.

She jerked her head around, searching for the next escape. A staircase led downwards. She hobbled over and stumbled down the steps.

Animal teeth scattered on the floor, rats in the corners, nesting. A Polaroid of a sliced eyeball had been nailed to the wall beneath a precisely mounted spotlight. Below this was the body it had been taken from: she thought she recognized him as the man who had sold her a comb earlier that day.

Another body lay at the end of the short, subterranean hallway: maggots had blunted the sharp planes of the face and made a curlicue border along the dark hairline, but it still bore a startling resemblance to a woman who used to sell tickets at the movie theatre.

In a small, clean room she found another woman's body, razor blades embedded in cheeks and neck tendons. A scratching at the small window near the ceiling made her turn her head. The glass broke, as if in slow motion, across her face. It showered down before her like frozen, glittering, magical tears.

First arms, then a head, burst through the rainbow-sheened glass. The man from the restaurant grinned at her through the blood washing over his face. He looked down at the cement floor, where he had dropped his knife.

She stooped and picked up the knife off the floor. She stroked its smooth handle. She imagined using it, slipping it through clothing into flesh and beyond. She imagined making love to the man's body with it, kissing him all over with it, until he cried. It made her feel strange, imagining a man's tears, imagining a man's submission.

Maxwell stared at his lover through a dull red filter. Her constant screams of passion had receded as they blended with the loud music in his head, until eventually he could not distinguish the two melodies. He desperately wanted her to join him with the knife, to make of them one creature, to blend their blood streams until they were, finally, one single, gaping wound.

But then he found himself falling the rest of the way through the

basement window, glass and blood descending with him as he flew away to regions of dream.

Only when her voice finally gave out into a raw, bleeding whisper did she realize she had been screaming constantly since her discovery of the first body. The scream joined the frantic music which still filled her head.

She struck out against him even as he crashed into her, but in the course of their struggles dropped the knife. She was surprised to find him naked but for his bright red uniform of blood — at some point he had stripped away all pretension. His toenails felt like metal against her body, but his fingernails were so sharp she did not feel them at all when they slid beneath the surface of her skin.

He brought the edge of his hand down on her cheekbone, filling her vision with bright, blinding flashes of light. He grinned at her, and dipped his finger into the blood covering his face, and drew a bright red line across her neck.

She rose on to her knees and rolled, and he rolled with her, his teeth biting her ear as he whispered her name. They crashed into the door, closing it firmly on the hall and the little light it had provided.

A glint in the dark, a flat surface catching any available light. His hand was on it, and raising it high above her head.

The knife passed through her hand, nailing it to the door. She spat into his face and he pulled the knife out and thrust it at her again. The point passed through the surface of her right cheek. She stretched out her arms to ward off the blows: the blade bit at the fleshy areas of her palms, her fingers, releasing exclamations of blood. She jerked forward, catching him off-guard, jamming the webbing of her damaged hand into his throat. He fell back and she was on her feet again, slamming open the door and running back into the hall. She turned and scrambled up a pile of crates to a screened window, her hands leaving red prints on everything she touched.

Then he was behind her, pushing her face roughly into the large squares of wire mesh. She could feel the chequerboard pattern etching into her soft skin. Getting her feet beneath her, she pushed back against a crate launching them both backwards through the air. She could feel something breaking beneath her, something in the man's body, as they slammed into the floor. But he simply groaned and said, 'Darling.'

Across the hall there was the open door to a dingy bathroom. She crawled up off the man and scrambled through the door on her hands and knees, locking it behind her. She stood up. The bathroom was brightly lit by six huge incandescent bulbs mounted in the ceiling. Judging from the heat they gave off she imagined they had been

burning for some time. Blood like red greasepaint smeared the fixtures. On the other side of the door a high-pitched man's voice — imitating a woman — began chanting her name.

She screamed back at him, 'What did I do? I'm a *nice* person!' Then she laughed huskily, the laughter bringing bile up her raw throat.

A knife blade slipped through a crack in the door panel, moving back and forth first in a sawing motion, then a chiselling one. She grabbed a piece of broken pipe off the floor and started swinging at the blade, finally snapping it off. She released a strained whoop of victory. 'What kind of lover would *you* be?' she screamed through the door.

'I *loved* you!' the man shouted on the other side.

Jane collapsed into bleating laughter. The loud music faded from her head, exhausting her. 'No one can make love to me,' she said, finally, quietly. 'I am too afraid of all these sharp edges.'

A thundering on the other side of the door, and then the door disintegrated in rage around her. Clouds of dust floated in brilliant crimson light.

Maxwell saw himself in the bathroom's mirrored, bloodstained wall. Jane's face floated at his knees, gazing up at his reflection in a way which resembled longing, but which he knew might be any emotion at all. He realized, now, that he could never know what Jane really felt about anything. With a scream he plunged the blade into his own belly. He looked down at what he had done to himself, examining the knife handle curiously, as if it were his umbilical cord suddenly reappeared after all these years.

He sank to his knees behind her, touching her torn shoulder with one hand.

'I am too afraid,' she said.

'We're all afraid,' he said.

'Am I going to die now?' she asked.

'No,' he replied, gazing down at the blood seeping from his belly. She did not move away. He would always be thankful for that, as he closed his eyes, and in his long dream carried her back upstairs and into his bed.

* * *

Steve Rasnic Tem is the award-winning author of 'The Rains', published in the previous volume of *Dark Terrors.* His tales have appeared in numerous major horror anthologies,

including *The Best New Horror, The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror, Forbidden Acts* and *MetaHorror*. More recently his work has been published in *Darkside, Palace Corbie, A Nightmare Dozen,* and he has seven pieces in the anthology *365 Scary Stories*. The inspiration for 'Sharp Edges' is succinct: 'It came out of my love, and admiration for, the films of Dario Argento,' says the author. 'It was written under the influence of a driving Goblin soundtrack.'

This Is Your Life (Repressed Memory Remix)
PAT CADIGAN

By the time she was on the flight back to Massachusetts, Renata had grown weary of condolences. You're forty years old, your father dies. If you haven't been close to him for most of your life, you're not going to suddenly discover a deep well of emotion connected to him.

Of course, she had to remind herself, it wasn't that way with a lot of people. A good many of her co-workers, for example, would not have had to fly to get home for a family funeral, and they'd have been pretty torn up about it. But that was how you felt when you lost someone who had been one of the mainstays of your life.

Her friend Vinnie had been nonplussed to know that she didn't consider her father one of the mainstays of her own life. Brought up in a large extended Italian family, Vincenza Maria Fanucci was a curious mix of highly independent, uncompromising professional and Old World filial piety. Vinnie regarded her own father as a big kid ensconced in the body of a flawed minor deity who permeated, even now, the lives of his five children with his paternal. oh, hell, Renata didn't even know what to call it. Paternal existence. Paternal paternity. Daddyish-ness. Staring down unseeing at the inflight magazine in her lap, Renata thought that she probably knew more of the substance of Vinnie's father than she ever had of her own.

It wasn't that her father hadn't loved her, or that he had rejected her. She could remember times when she was little when her father had taken her to the movies or to the circus, or even just out to the playground on Saturday. Just her alone — in those days, her brother Jules had been only a baby. Her father had dutifully pushed her on the swings, spun the merry-go-round for her till she had got dizzy almost to the point of nausea, caught her at the bottom of the slide.

No, not just *dutifully*. That was unfair. He had been pleasant. She had even believed that he'd been having fun, but no child could believe that anyone wouldn't have fun in a playground. Any more than, she supposed, any child — any very young child — could believe that she wasn't the only thing of any real importance in her parents' world.

Eventually, you'd know better. By then, however, you had usually achieved adolescence and if you gave that sort of thing any thought at all, it was probably more with satisfaction than anything else, maybe a fleeting sense of relief as you left the house to go meet friends. As

Renata had always understood it, this was called *flying the nest.* Except some people worked out some kind of compromise, where they left but acceded to a kind of placeholder that marked a bit of territory that they would always belong to, rather than vice versa.

My, but our thoughts are heavy today, for someone claiming not to be terribly affected by her father's death.

She turned a page and frowned down at a photo of an impossibly plush hotel in some ridiculously inaccessible vacation region. Perhaps that was because, instead of mourning her father, she was mourning the profound and lasting connection they had failed to achieve. As she got older, he'd just had less and less time for her, or her brother Jules. She thought now that probably he'd barely had time for their mother. But that had just been the way things were back then. His draftsman's job consumed more of his time and attention. The company he'd worked for had been switching over to Computer Aided Design, trying to keep up with the rest of the corporate Joneses, and her father had had to re-train himself almost from scratch in a job that he had been proficient in — had *thought* he'd been proficient in — for almost twenty years. New developments had eaten up his time and hadn't left much in the way even of bare bones behind.

And hadn't it been that way for a lot of other families as well? Sure. *We can't all be jolly Italian dynasties, now, can we? No, we sure can't.*

What sadness there was for her in the occasion had much more to do with the absence of the man's effect on her rather than the absence of the man himself. Maybe that was sadder than his death, she thought, and actually felt her throat begin to tighten.

Now, now. Let's not go to pieces just because it's an occasion that usually calls for it, she thought, sneaking a look at her seat-mate on the right as she pretended that she wasn't dabbing tears from her eyes. No worries there; the woman had dozed off with her mouth open and her reading glasses a centimeter from the end of her prominent nose. She was a plump, middle-aged blonde made even plumper by masses of hair extensions artfully braided into her natural hair. Naturally-*grown* hair, Renata amended to herself; the colour was as acquired as the extra tresses. It wasn't a bad job. Renata wouldn't have known except that one tiny connection knot was peeking out at her near the woman's left temple. She smiled at it, absently patting the greying brown hair fluffing over the back of her own collar.

Tell you what, Blondella, Renata thought at her; *you don't notice my tears and I won't notice your hair-falsies. Is it a deal?*

The woman went on sleeping silently, her breath inaudible in spite of her open mouth. Too bad. A snore as an inadvertent reply would have made her laugh at least inwardly and dried up her tears.

She should have known, Renata chided herself, looking down at the ridiculous vacation hotel ad again. Comic timing, like so many other things, was just never *there* in real life. At least, not in *her* real life.

Her surprise at finding her brother waiting to meet her at the airport was almost enough to be honest shock. He was standing at the top of the escalators that slid down to the baggage carousel area, his face sad, worried and portentous, which was even more disconcerting. She had always described Jules to everyone as the sort of person the term *even-tempered* had been invented for. Unflappable Jules Adrian Prescott, who had raised his voice maybe three times a year, usually to say 'Ow!' after stubbing his toe or something. There had been times she had felt like telling him they could trade birth order and he could be the older Prescott kid, as he had always been more mature than she. Sometimes, though, she wondered if he didn't frustrate the hell out of his wife, Lena.

The thought of Lena made her automatically look at Jules' left hand; his wedding ring was gone. Now she *was* shocked, almost enough to draw back as he leaned forward to kiss her cheek and say something, but he looked so fraught that she shut up instead and submitted. For all she knew, he had accidentally left his ring in the bathroom after showering. Why add a stupid, intrusive, and possibly erroneous question to a time like this?

A time like *what,* though? Jules hadn't been terribly close to their father, either.

'How are you feeling?' he asked her as he took her carry-on bag and steered her on to the escalator.

'Okay, I guess, Julio,' she said, using the old childhood nickname, in which the j was pronounced improperly as j and not h. 'But you don't look too good—'

'Yeah, well, a time like this,' he said almost offhandedly, and she felt a *frisson* as he unknowingly echoed her thoughts. 'It's all so—' he shook his head and a sudden stray breeze rifled his thick brown hair like invisible fingers searching for something concealed there.

She looked up at him, puzzled. *It's all so* what, *Julio?* she wanted to say, but the pain in his expression stopped her. Maybe if the non-relationship with their father saddened her, she thought suddenly, it was even more so for Jules. Maybe he'd been reflecting on everything he hadn't had as his father's son, on memories that should have been there to comfort and reassure but were not, never could have been, never would be. Did Lena understand? she wondered, anxious for him now.

They collected her one small bag from the carousel and then followed a silly, over-complicated route made even more convoluted

by detours around awkwardly-placed areas of renovation hidden behind impassive wooden walls. Signs warned of dangers hidden behind their featureless facades. Apparently there were things back there that could maim you, cripple you, kill you without warning. But nothing reached out to harm them or so much as scare them as they made their way to Jules' car in the parking garage. The walk took a good twenty minutes and during that time, Jules never did manage to complete the sentence that had ended with *everything being so* and she thought again that he was probably suffering from the realization that it was all just *So what?*

Her first thought was that her mother needed heart pills. Everything about her was *grey,* in a way that went beyond old age. Her skin looked as if it had been dusted with ashes only a few shades lighter than her hair, her lips might have moved a doctor to pronounce her cyanotic, and even the pupils of her eyes seemed to have lost all pigmentation. She sat, or rather sagged on a chair at the dining-room table, while Renata's Aunt Daisy stood over her like a sentinel or a household servant waiting for instruction, occasionally squeezing one of her mother's plump, rounded shoulders.

Daisy's name was one of those ridiculous mistakes people sometimes made in christening their children. For Renata, the name *Daisy* had always suggested capriciousness and whimsy to the point of complete foolishness. But Daisy was serious, often humourless, and almost never emotional in any way. The only remotely daisy-ish thing about her was her yellow hair which was actually natural and looked dyed. It gave Renata another pause. Did anyone in her family ever get *anything* right? she wondered.

Jules had allowed her to carry in her own suitcase. Now he had vanished into another part of the house or into thin air, Renata wasn't sure which. Daisy's twin daughters were both there, one with her husband, the other with her female partner. The four of them were huddled near the antique sideboard where the good china and crystal sat safely in the dark of the cabinets most of the year, emerging only for Christmas-season dinners. On the mirror-shiny surface, kept that way by her mother's monthly polishings, a collection of photos of various family members gazed out over the room as if the frames were actually funny little windows in so many sizes and shapes that each subject had just happened to wander up to, and were now staring through with vague unease at all that went on.

Renata's own vague unease snapped into precise clarity. There were no pictures on the sideboard now. Someone had removed them, every single one, and she had never known that to happen, outside of her mother's regularly scheduled cleaning sessions. She put her bag

down where she stood and looked around, unease beginning to mutate into suspicion.

On the other side of the room, Mrs Anderson from next door was standing by a tall bookcase with the O'Briens from across the street. The three of them looked exhausted, as if something — her father's death, or something unrelated except for timing? — had been draining them of every bit of energy and endurance. It was how another of her co-workers, a pretty young woman in accounting services, had looked after seeing her sister through a long and terrible death from AIDS.

But if Mrs Anderson and the O'Briens had been through something similar, it couldn't have been with *her* father, Renata thought. Her father's final heart trouble had dragged on a bit, but it had not been that kind of ordeal. Even if it had been, she couldn't imagine that these people would have been involved to such an extent.

The O'Briens' son Dan was sitting on a stool by the television, his elbows on his knees and his big hands folded under his chin. Dan was her age and looked about the same as he had the last time she had seen him several years before, except there was a little less of his greying, light brown hair and a little more round softness in his face. He was watching her with an intensity that almost frightened her, that *would* frighten her if he kept it up.

If he does *keep it up,* she decided, *I'll go over there and give him one upside the head, as the kids say. Knock that stupid look right off his face.*

Her Aunt Daisy was watching her with almost the same expression, she realized suddenly. They *all* were. They were *watching* her, as if they expected her to do something strange and dangerous. A chill spread out over her scalp and down her neck, and she knew that if her hair could actually have stood on end, it would have.

She thought absurdly of the woman on the plane. *Too bad I don't have* that *hair to stand on end — that would* really *give them something to stare at.* And now she was staring right back at all of them, each and every one in turn, and the fact that they weren't the least bit put off by this, that not one of them felt compelled to look away or even blink, was the worst of all.

'What?' she said finally, trying to force down the panic that was lifting so rapidly inside her that she had to gasp for breath. 'What? *What is it?* What the hell are you all looking at me like this for?'

There was a moment of utter silence, not long, but if it had stretched out any longer, she would have screamed into it. Abruptly, Dan O'Brien got up from the stool over by the television and gestured at it. 'Renata, there's something you have to see before the funeral.'

She gave her head a quick, minute shake. 'What — an old re-run of *Masterpiece Theater?*''

‘Please,’ he said, and his voice was as frightening as everything else, because it was so damned *calm*. ‘This hasn’t been easy on your mother or Jules, it isn’t easy for any of us, and it won’t be easy for you. But you have to see this. You do. And after you see it, you’ll understand. Everything will be clear.’

Renata looked to her mother for some sign but her mother had buried her face in Daisy’s waist, while Daisy held her, stroking her hair and glaring at Renata as if she were to blame. ‘Where’s Jules?’ she asked Dan, glancing at her twin cousins and their respective partners.

‘Jules has seen it,’ Dan said, suddenly sounding prim.

She wanted to make a smart remark about how they all had cable where she lived, so she had probably seen it herself, but something in her gave out and she sat down on the stool instead. *Just get it over with,* she told herself firmly. *If it’s something utterly horrid, just leave. Don’t even stay for the funeral.*

Dan put on the TV and then reached down to the VCR on the shelf underneath. Renata had a glimpse of a greasy man standing in front of a chat-show panel of even greasier people and then her father was looking earnestly out at her from the television screen. She jumped, putting one hand to her chest. God, but it looked and sounded so *much* like him, it was positively scary.

Then she suppressed a groan. It was one of these ghoulish videotaped will things that people knew would be played back after their deaths. So *ghoulish.* She felt her stomach turn over. Didn’t anyone ever consider what it would be like for the survivors to watch something like this? No wonder Jules was hiding out.

‘My darling Renata,’ her father said, folding his hands and leaning forward, as if he really were seeing her in the lens of the camera focused on him. He had been videotaped sitting at the head of the dining-room table. How much she and her father had resembled each other, she thought, much more than her father and Jules, or even herself and Jules. There was no missing the similarity of the shape of their faces and eyes, and even their voices shared a certain timbre. ‘My darling daughter Renata, this is the hardest thing I have ever had to do. Harder, in some ways, than dying, really. I know I *am* dying. I can feel my heart becoming weaker every day. If my hearing were good enough, I would probably hear the blood in my veins and arteries slowing down, swashing and gurgling, getting ready to stop.’

Renata took a deep, careful breath to control her nausea. Maybe her father *did* know what sort of effect this would have and he was doing it on purpose, some kind of weird revenge of an angry, dying man on his still-living relatives.

‘So I must — *must* — make a clean breast of things. I cannot die

carrying the guilt and the shame of what's happened between us any longer.'

Her nausea melted into bewilderment. 'The guilt and shame of what had happened between them?' Being a distant, mostly absent father figure was a source of *guilt* and *shame?* The poor man, she thought in a sudden rush of pity. Then her bewilderment returned, along with a dash of irritation. If it had bothered him *that* much, he could have apologized, in person, while he'd still been alive.

'No parent should ever put a child through the terrible things I put you through,' he continued. 'When I think of the hell you endured, I want to—'

'Stop it,' Renata snapped suddenly and jumped up from the stool. 'Stop it *right now.'*

Dan O'Brien looked startled but obediently pointed a slender remote control at the VCR. Her father's face froze in mid-word. Everyone in the room was looking at her as if she were displaying the worst manners possible, except for her mother who was slumped against Daisy and sobbing softly into a wad of tissues.

'I refuse to listen to another moment of this travesty,' Renata said angrily. 'Obviously Dad went a little wonky before he died. I'm awfully sorry about that, it's a terrible thing to happen. But now he's gone. His troubles are over, and there's no good reason to torture ourselves with this kind of thing.'

There was no answer except the sound of her mother's sobbing.

'Where's Jules?' Renata said, disgusted. 'I want my suitcase. I'm going. If Jules won't drive me back to the airport, I'll take a cab or I'll even walk if I have to, but I'm not going to stay here—'

'Please,' Dan said and she turned to him in surprise. 'You don't know how important this is.'

'You're probably right about that. You're not family to me, however—'

'Well, no, I'm not. Though in some ways, I may be even closer.' Dan's face was frighteningly sincere as well as serious. 'I'm your father's therapist. I treated him for two years before he died.'

Renata turned to her mother for confirmation, but her mother wouldn't look at her. Her gaze went to the O'Briens to see what their reaction was. They had none, or none that she could see, except for the same strange quiet that everyone except her mother was hell-bent on maintaining. She turned back to Dan. 'I didn't know you were a doctor. I thought you went to business school.'

'I did, but I switched direction a little while ago. Now I'm a therapist. Not a doctor in the sense that I could prescribe medications, but most of that stuff is poison anyway.' Renata was sure that Dan's smile was meant to look benevolent, but to her it seemed more vacant

than anything. 'I do a lot of work with hypnosis.'

'Fine,' Renata said. 'But don't expect me to make an appointment just because my father did. I'm a lousy subject for hypnosis, I just don't have the attention span.' She raised her voice. 'Jules! Jules, *dammit,* where are you, I want to—'

Dan caught her arm as she was about to walk out of the room. 'Renata, you're making a hard situation all but impossible. Sit down and watch the tape, and then you'll understand everything.'

Her gaze went from his face to his hand, still gripping her upper arm just a little too tightly and back again several times. Astoundingly, he failed to get the message. 'Let *go* of my fucking *arm,'* she said finally. He glanced over at his parents, who turned as one to Mrs Anderson. Mrs Anderson's gaze went to the twins, who passed the look to their respective partners before raising their eyebrows at their mother.

They were all crazy, Renata realized suddenly. She didn't know what brand of psychosis they were sharing, what it involved or whether it was dangerous, but they were nuts and she wasn't and by God, she was getting out of there. She bolted for the door, deciding she could live with the loss of her overnight bag and collided with someone else, someone too strong for her to twist away from, who struggled her back from the doorway, bruising her forearms with a hard grip, and forced her down on to the couch in front of the television set.

'Jules! What—'

He grabbed the stool she had been sitting on and planted it just to her left, sat down on it and seized her arms again. *'Shut up!'* he bellowed into her face, so close that she could feel how hot his breath was. It was that sensation more than anything that shocked her. She could not remember ever being that physically close to her brother.

'Now, *listen,"* he growled at her and she was horrified to see tears welling in his eyes. *'Listen* and *watch.* The suffering is—' He stopped, breathing hard and deep through his nose, glaring at her.

And again he left the sentence unfinished. *At a time like this. Everything is so. The suffering.*

Then her father was speaking to her from the television again, the live man performing the task that the dead man had delegated.

'. to punish myself in more hideous ways than the state would, I think. I *had* thought of turning myself in, as a matter of fact, but your mother talked me out of it. She said that a man in my health, so many years later — well, the only thing that would really make a difference would be if we could — if *I* could, actually — try to make it up to you in some way. To get you the help that you're going to need, for the rest of your life.'

Renata made a disgusted noise. ‘Oh, Christ, what is it? Was there a trust fund and he embezzled—’

‘Shut up,’ her brother warned her quietly.

‘—can never give you back those years of your childhood that I stole. Her father’s voice was beginning to sound whiny. ‘All I can do is tell you I was wrong, beg for your forgiveness from here, beyond the grave, and assure you that you will get only the very best counsellors, doctors, hospitalization when you need it—’

‘‘Hospitalization?’ Warning bells went off in her head to the point where she could not have told the difference if she had been hearing them outside. Abruptly she remembered a basic self-defence move Vinnie had taught her, a way to twist your wrist to get out of a man’s grip so that no matter how big and strong he was, he would have to let you go. *My brothers taught me this one,* Vinnie had said, *they told me that if any guy was gonna beat me up, it would be them, not some stranger. Of course, they never did beat me up, not that I recall, anyway -*

She pushed Jules away and stood up. To her surprise, Jules launched himself at her and pinned her down on the couch with his body. Renata cried out, more in anger than anything else. The worst part about it was that no one else in the room had moved, *no one,* not to help her, not to help Jules, not to do *anything,* and all the while her father’s voice went on and on and on, talking and talking and talking. *Dead Man Talking,* she thought, and bit her lip to keep from laughing hysterically.

‘. to treat my beloved daughter in such a hideous fashion. I don’t know what drove me to it, to act out my vile needs on your innocence, to soil and betray your trust in me as your father, your protector..’

‘What?’ Renata said, trying to push Jules off her. ‘What? Stop that! Turn that fucking TV *off.’*

But no one moved, and her father’s voice whined on, ‘. and you, so pure, so loving, so unwilling to believe that life would have such ugliness in it that you completely repressed all memory of what I had done to you. It was as if your sweet little mind said, “All right, then, if he won’t be a father to me out here, then I will create the loving father that he isn’t in my mind—”‘

‘What?’ She arched her back, trying to buck her brother off but he seemed to get heavier and heavier.

‘“—and if I can’t get anyone to protect me or help me out here, then I will create the support group that I need in my mind—”‘

Support group? Had her father just said *support group?* Renata was beyond disbelief. This was some kind of horrible joke, it had to be. Some kind of absurd practical joke put on by Jules and her mother. They had been driven mad with grief, they—

‘—hypnotic regression to recover my memories, we’ve determined

that I've observed you displaying at least thirteen different personalities, just to help you cope with the terrible things I've done to you—'

'What?' Renata looked from her father's earnest image on the TV, babbling away about *abuse* and *multiples* and *recovered memories* to Jules' tormented, painful face above her. 'Julio, what in God's name is he talking about?'

He turned to look at Dan. 'This must be the one Dad referred to as "Cleo." She always denied all knowledge of anything that was going on.'

'Who's Cleo?' Renata demanded. 'What are *you* talking about now?'

'Cleo,' Jules said to her. 'Short for Cleopatra. Queen of Denial?' Pause. 'You get it?'

'No, wait a minute. And get *off me,* goddammit—' Renata arched her back again, trying to throw him off.

'Careful!' Dan called. 'Maybe that isn't Cleo, it could be Lilith just *pretending* to be Cleo so she can molest you—'

Jules made a disgusted noise, started to get off her and then didn't, instead planting his knee in the centre of her stomach without letting go of her wrists. 'What do we do?' he asked, frightened.

Dan was at his side in a moment. 'Well, the first thing we do is, we keep our heads. Remember, I told you that doing an intervention can be an incredibly emotional experience. You can't start panicking as soon as things get hairy. It's going to get worse before it gets better, it's going to get a *lot* worse, and Renata needs all of us to be strong and calm for her—'

'Hey, asshole,' Renata said angrily, 'I'm right here, not in the next room. Now get my crazy brother off me and stop talking about me in the third—'

'Should I call an ambulance?' asked one of the twins in a tight, anxious voice.

'Not yet,' Dan said. 'Some of these personalities can be incredibly strong, we don't want any innocent paramedics to get hurt. As soon as she's calmer, we'll call a private service and have them take her out to Wood Grove.' He knelt down beside the couch and brushed Renata's hair out of her face. 'I want to speak with Renata, please. Or The Boss. That's what your father always called her,' he added to Jules. 'The Boss was the one who always took charge when things got a little loose around the edges and threatened to fall apart' He turned back to her and spoke clearly into her face, over-enunciating as if she were stupid.

'I said, send out Renata *right now.* We want to talk to *Renata.'*

'Dan,' she said, trying to sound calm but hearing the shakiness in

her voice. ‘Dan, stop a minute. What are you doing? At least, tell me what you think you’re doing? We’ve known each other all our lives. We played together, went to the same school. Hell, you even took me to the Christmas dance one year when my boyfriend came down with shingles.’ She swallowed hard. ‘Remember that?’

Dan’s face took on an expression so sad that she wanted to cry for him. ‘You see, Jules? You see how insidious this thing is? She remembers going to a dance she never went to, because it’s far better than remembering what *really* happened that night, that her father forced me to bring her to that motel where he was meeting with that group he called The Sex Club—’

‘Dan, there are *pictures, photos* of us together at the dance—’

‘Faked,’ Dan said, with authority. ‘All faked. So you’d go on believing that you’d had a happy childhood and a good life, and not the horror that you really had to live with.’ He bowed his head for a moment. ‘And so I could repress the memory of my part in what you suffered.’

The rest of them had gathered around the couch now, even her mother, sniffling and dabbing at her eyes and clutching Mrs Anderson for support. They all looked down at her as if she were some kind of strange, unidentifiable creature that had somehow landed, injured and frightened, in the middle of an ordinary, suburban living room.

‘This is *wrong,’* Renata told them desperately. ‘This is *wrong,* this is *not* what happened. Can’t you hear me, don’t you understand me? *None of this is true.* It didn’t happen. *It didn‘t happen!’*

One of her cousins reached down and touched her shoulder gently. ‘I know it’s hard to believe. The human mind is so amazing, there are all sorts of things that it can do, including repressing memories that are too horrible for us to live with. But don’t worry. Wood Grove is a good place. They’ve got a great staff there, including Dan—’ she paused to smile over at him. ‘And it’s completely covered by insurance. They helped me. They and Dan helped me.’

‘And me,’ said the other twin, and put her hand on Jules’ shoulder. ‘And they’ve performed miracles with your brother. His personalities will never be integrated the way ours were, but he’s learned how to manage them better than a traffic cop in New York rush hour.’

Everyone gave a polite titter at her joke and Jules’ expression was an impossible combination of pride and nausea.

Dan leaned forward and put his hands on both sides of her face, turning her head gently so he could stare into her eyes. ‘The important thing to do right now,’ he said, ‘is relax. You’re among friends, you’re safe, you can stop denying and pretending. You’re a bad subject for hypnosis? Don’t worry, I can fix that. I can make you a good subject. I

can. I'm very good at what I do.'

She tried to draw back but there was nowhere to go.

'Next month at this time,' Dan said gently, 'next month, you'll remember it all. You'll have all those memories and you'll be able to take them on and cope with them. I promise.' He looked up at one of the twins. 'You can phone for the ambulance now.'

* * *

Pat Cadigan's short stories have recently appeared on the *Omni* website, and she contributed a quarter of *Omni's* first round-robin story, 'Making Good Time'. Anthology appearances include *Killing Me Softly* edited by Gardner Dozois and two edited by Ellen Datlow, *Little Deaths* and *Lethal Kisses,* while upcoming stories are due in *Dying For It* and David Garnett's re-revived *New Worlds.* ' "This Is Your Life (Repressed Memory Remix)" was a direct result of my having read the book *Victims of Memory: Incest, Accusations and Shattered Lives* by Mark Prendergast,' says Cadigan. 'Prendergast's book is exhaustively documented and researched, a scholarly investigation not of incest accusations *per se,* but of incest accusations that come strictly from what is commonly called "recovered memory therapy". While Prendergast does not assume that everyone accused is innocent, he shows the horror of having your life suddenly torn apart by accusations that come seemingly from nowhere, that not only persist, but spread like a virus even when there is hard evidence to the contrary. In one particularly tragic case, a woman managed to convince her entire family that they had been Satanists who had abused her sexually throughout her childhood. Her father went so far as to turn himself in to the police as a child molester and served time in prison before the daughter had second thoughts about what she thought she remembered. The father never actually did manage to remember anything, but decided that he was in denial, or just suppressing — after all, why would his daughter accuse him unless it had actually happened? As a parent, I find this bloody chilling. I'd rather face a vampire or a zombie, thank you. And then it occurred to me that all of the people who recover memories always remember as victims — no one ever recovers a memory of being a victimizer, a perpetrator. And *then* I decided that maybe there was a horror story that might match the

prospect of having your offspring accuse you of the unspeakable — the idea of your *parent* suddenly "remembering" years of abusing you, and the rest of your family deciding to help you remember it, too.'

Little Holocausts
BRIAN HODGE

There must've been signs first. There always are — subtleties we're afraid to imagine go any deeper than one day's mood. So I don't suppose it was until our latest funeral that I broke down and admitted that something inside Jared was truly changing, and not for the better.

This one had been particularly rough on Jared. Neither of us had been strangers to funerals over the past few years, but this time it was for an earlier lover of Jared's, amicably parted from after a growing realization that all he and Terry had in them was the honeymoon.

People — lovers, especially — have a million ways of changing on you, most of them bad. Not inherently, maybe, but bad for you. Because you couldn't or wouldn't follow along.

You'll hear people say that only the dead don't change, but obviously they've never thought this through, because to the dead change comes naturally, as they seek their return to earth and air and water, while we survivors who loved them manage to forget all the flaws that kept things interesting. Remake them into idealized versions that we'd never be able to tolerate if they came walking back through the door this way, so perfect we'd eventually want to kill them all over again. You…you've changed, we'd accuse them, feeling somehow betrayed.

Terry had died at home — the virus, what else? — his current lover helping the nurses and hospice volunteers care for him. It's where we gathered after the funeral, his brownstone apartment with vintage wood as solid as a bank vault and laid out shotgun-style, one long chain of rooms full of friends, acquaintances, strangers. Everybody was welcome, except for those righteous fuckers who'd showed up at the cemetery to gloat in the distance, toting picket signs.

SODOMITES REPENT, that was one of the gentler ones. Some of them got almost as ugly as the faces underneath, eyes frightened and angry, prissy mouths crinkled tight like drawstring purses.

"And those are the ones with the nerve to claim they're made in God's image?" Jared had whispered hoarsely in the cemetery.

"I'd always pictured God as better looking," I said. "That doesn't make much of a case for omnipotence, does it?"

He appeared not to have heard me, staring at this wretched Greek chorus. "But what if they are? What if they really are?"

At Terry's apartment we threw our coats atop the pile already on the bed, Jared lingering over all the sleeves that seemed caught up in some pointless struggle for supremacy. I wondered if he was

remembering being in this same bed three years earlier, maybe recalling a conversation or some good night's love.

"Déjà vu?" I said.

Or maybe he was thinking that here was where Terry must have died. Jared pushed hair back from his eyes, saying, "It's felt like déjà vu here all afternoon. I'm just getting way too familiar with days like this."

"We're here, we're queer," I murmured, "we're dropping like flies."

"And you're not helping any, with your laughter from the gallows," he said, so I just held him, limp and unresponsive even when I squeezed along the back of his neck, where he liked it, and would ordinarily flex back into my hand like Voodoo, our cat. "Was it this way for you when Serge died?"

I stiffened. "What way?"

"Remember that picture from Vietnam? Of that Buddhist monk? He'd set himself on fire in the middle of a street and just sat there burning. Didn't move? Well… like I wish I had the kind of control he must've had, not to feel the flames," Jared said into my neck. "That way."

"Serge was different. You can't compare the two."

And Jared knew better. Serge and I weren't broken up; not exactly. Serge hadn't been sick. I felt something stir down deep, like the rusty scraping open of a hatch on a ship long sunk, and hurried to slam it shut again. In its saltwatery grave.

"Serge… Serge wasn't the same at all."

"This isn't a good day to split hairs," Jared said. "Not if they're both dead when they shouldn't be."

We joined the others, who wandered from room to room in a kind of subdued humor, by turns warm, then mordant, everyone here instinctively craving each other's company and heartbeats. I'd not known Terry, never even met him, and so spent awhile staring at a picture that Jared pointed out, contrasting the vibrant guy on Kodak paper with the one I'd first encountered in his coffin. Had I not had Jared's word on it, I doubt I'd've made any connection.

An hour later I went looking for Jared after I hadn't seen him for a while, and found him alone in the middle of the kitchen, the final link on the chain of rooms.

"You doing okay?" I said to his back.

When he finally turned, he had a look on his face I wasn't braced for, a look that balled up its fist and sucker-punched me right in the heart. He pointed across the room, where he must've been staring for too long, toward the floor along the back wall, near the door, where you'd probably set something too large to fit in the trash can until you

could run it out to the dumpster. It was an unused box of Depends. The way Jared pointed it out, looked at it, the box embodied all the loss and sorrow and indignity that had ever escaped Pandora's.

"Diapers," said Jared, like an accusation. Approaching tears. "That's what it comes down to? Goddamn diapers."

Whenever he came to the next town, the stout man in the soot-gray top hat spent a few days getting to know it from the inside out before plying his varied trades. By strolling its streets and alleyways, by poking amongst piles of rubble with his lacquered walking stick, by sniffing over puddles of spilt blood, both psychic and sanguine, he made of each town a lover from whom he could ferret out prizes most delicious. In tipping his nose to a breeze he might sort its complex mélange into component threads: here, garlic; there, despair; further along, mingled excrements of men and machines.

Such habits served sentiment more than utility now. The world held no more surprises for him, and frontiers were illusory. Cities all smelled the same, the populace of one burning and burying, pissing and shitting, in equal measures to those of the one before and the one to come. He could expect nothing else so long as they in their millions sucked from the same monstrous tit.

He missed the land's Byzantine variety of the old days, or as he remembered them to be — time did possess a peculiar gilding. Three hundred years hence, he might very well look back on these present days with nothing but fond nostalgia. Great gods! he would marvel, but back then how they knew how to suffer!

And they did. Boom times, these, everywhere he went.

He'd trod here before, fuzzy on how many decades ago, but enough such that he scarcely recognized it now. How the city had grown; how the city continued to do so, beyond all sensibility, a body sprouting brick and iron tumors in frantic abundance, beyond the needs of healthy expansion. Arteries of thought and commerce met, only to choke one another. Idled factories sat scabbed with corrosion, dead hearts presiding over the decay of a system they'd once nourished, while tenements suppurated, spilling infections into the streets.

As they had sown, so would they reap, and reaping time had come.

The pack which set stealthily upon him one evening he likened to maggots squirming from the fetid cavity that had hatched them. He listened to them jeer him, his appearance, his obvious differences. It was English they spoke, but no English he'd heard the last time he'd walked these lands, a newer dialect sprung up that would set the Queen to spinning in her grave.

That they wanted his money became quite apparent, regardless.

"Don't be absurd," he told them. "I've very little use for the currency of the realm."

They glanced at one another, translating.

"Dead man walking," one decided. "Only he don't know it yet."

He counted two guns drawn and another displayed in the waist of one's baggy trousers before he showed them an avuncular smile, gave his face a half-turn, and lifted his walking stick to tap its pewter head upon the ruddy padding over his cheekbone, below his widening eye.

"Now if you'd take a moment from your busy schedules to look in here, we can wrap this up in a trice."

His eye continued to bulge, window to the soul flung wide. He thought of all and nothing, the vast repertoire of his days an open book. He bent his soul into a kind of parabola, on which they might focus through pupil and metacosm, and see reflected back at themselves a thousandfold what each had cast toward it — all their loathings and hungers, resentments and fears.

It was absurdly simple. They did most of the work. And God alone knew what each one saw. Mischief-makers such as these were doers, not talkers, wasting no words to tell of terrible wonders.

Two of them soiled trousers and ran. One turned his pistol on his friend a dozen times over, even while the fallen body twitched on asphalt; the final bullet he'd reserved to put through his own mouth. Another fell to the ground screeching, then hooked his long fingernails back to gouge out both offending eyes.

The man in the gray top hat lowered his bulk to his haunches, beside the blind and whimpering brigand. Like Jack Horner seeking plums, he plunged his thumb into the runny well of one ruined eye socket. There he left it, while visions came and went, until he was satisfied: If the dead ones had lives and histories comparable to this one, he clearly had done them a favor.

"Terribly sorry I came too late. Dreadfully sorry," he said. "But in your case there was really nothing left to save, you see."

He tidied his thumb on the boy's jacket, then righted himself and straightened his dingy frock coat. From a breast pocket he produced his card, dropping it onto the writhing boy's chest. It was color of ivory and, bordered with filigree, read:

HIERONYMUS BEADLE, ESQ.
⌑ Conjurer of Visions
⌑ Extractor of the Psychometric Arts
⌑ Trader in Souls

And so announced to the asphalt harvest, he went upon his way

in search of a warm fireside, soft cushions, and whatever passed for mulled wine in this place of ignoble rot.

By the time of Terry's funeral, Jared and I'd had a couple of good years together. Career waiter and career video store manager; the tail of the world had somehow eluded our grasp. At least Jared was still giving it a good chase. Most of my running now was in circles, five miles each day and ending right where I'd started.

I'd noticed him a half-dozen times in the video store before we'd exchanged any deeper words than when his tape was due back. Midtwenties, a generous handful of years younger than I, and with round-lensed glasses and dark messy hair looking as if he could be equally at home in a law library or aerobics class. Danielle, my favorite co-worker, finally got tired of my doing nothing.

"Let's take a peek in his subconscious," she said, and pulled up his rentals on the computer. I was happily intrigued to find mostly Japanese animation, Kurosawa samurai films, and everything we had directed by Ken Russell and Sergio Leone.

The afternoon he asked if we had a copy of El Topo that we weren't letting on about, I was smitten. Jodorowsky's horrifying symbolist western that somehow veers into socioreligious parable-the boy was no fluff-monger. He said he'd looked all over the city for El Topo, and I had to tell him that he'd finally stumped the band, that it wasn't distributed domestically.

The instant he left the store, I phoned a gray market service in Miami for a rush-order VHS dub off Japanese laserdisc. I had it in hand two days later when he returned his current rental, and invited him to a private screening. If he was interested. Since he was such a good customer, with such commendable taste in film.

Several nights later, atop rumpled bedsheets, with our first taste of each other still on our lips, Jared said it had been the only VCR date he'd had where the other guy hadn't popped in a Jeff Stryker or Danny Sommers video, something like that.

"When you see Beach Blanket Boner coming on again, it gets a little obvious," he laughed.

Jared laughed a few weeks later when his lease was up, at my suggestion he move in, saying all I wanted was a cheap way to enliven my apartment's brick walls. For years he'd been trying to break into comics, with marginal success and rarely better than token payments. Within days of the move I was surrounded by prototypes of brooding existential loners, sketched in shades of gray, who wandered vaguely recognizable wastelands.

He laughed when he showed me all his rejection slips from the better-paying costumed hero markets, saying that the art was only for

killing time until he became headwaiter at his restaurant.

He laughed while he told me about being on his own since he was eighteen, when his father kicked him out after finding a porno magazine. “If it’d been hetero,” Jared said, “he probably would’ve taken me out to get drunk instead, maybe even buy me a whore if he could’ve found one cheap enough.”

He laughed when he told me about the former friends in high school who’d beaten him up for being too honest about himself when it wasn’t what they wanted to hear.

But by this time I was noticing how forced his laughter could sound, a worthy try but no longer good enough to fool me, like the unnerved and tuneless whistling of someone lost in a cemetery.

And that’s the way it sounded, more and more, until the day it stopped altogether.

“There’s this guy…”

No man wants to hear anything starting like this, tiny words that send heart and stomach skittering into sick panic. While you knew all along you were irreplaceable, everyone else knew better.

“There’s, um, this guy…”

Jared pulled it on me at one of the sidewalk tables in front of the beanery where we came for cheap, spicy meals served in crockery that would steam your face and warm both hands. A coterie of pigeons would always gather near occupied tables, to glean crumbs from the crusty bread served here.

“There’s, see, there’s this guy…”

It would be one of the last fine days of autumn before the killing frosts of winter took hold, the late afternoon sunlight golden even when the best it had to shine on looked otherwise run-down and corroded and ready for a renewal that would never come, because those with the power to decide these things knew that such places were easier destroyed than lived with.

“There’s this guy,” Jared tried again, then drew into himself as though he couldn’t bear to say the rest.

I wondered if this wasn’t some rebound thing, triggered by issues we’d gotten into last week, with Jared still smarting over Terry’s funeral and seeking…what? Reassurance in a world that offered him none?

He’d interrupted my daily 200 sit-ups and suggested, since we seemed to be getting along so well, with an eye to far tomorrows, making it as official as we could. A same-sex union ceremony? Lots of couples were doing them, even if they legally wouldn’t hold the breath expended on the vows.

“It’s not the legality of it,” he’d defended. “It’s the thing itself. It’s

the ceremony that counts. The statement we'd make."

I'd thought of when we first realized we had something going. Got ourselves tested for the virus, passed six months of fidelity, then got tested again, praying for a rerun of dual negatives, then putting the condoms away afterward in relief. This was all the ceremony we needed. All the statement. A phony marriage seemed like a hoax to play on ourselves. Why pretend to join some club that wouldn't have us for members?

And it surprised me how much bitterness I heard in my voice, how much rage I thought I'd sunk to the bottom of my ocean, until it might break itself down into complete apathy over everything I was denied, that so many others took for granted. Say, walking down any street with someone I obviously loved, and not having to care who realized it. I listened to myself, hearing everything I'd never meant Jared to think was directed at him; said I was sorry.

But once you've laughed in someone's face, he'll remember the sound forever, and only a saint can overlook your best reasons.

"Serge isn't coming back," he'd told me. "I'm the one you're stuck with now. I guess. I'm the one you have to settle for."

There's this guy.

My Brazilian black bean soup cooled in its bowl.

"Does he have a name?" I asked.

"Probably."

"'Probably.' Well that's good. Two years, and you can still surprise me over a bowl of beans. Jesus. I never took you for the toilet tramp sort."

Jared blinked at me in genuine surprise. "That's the kind of conversation you think we're having?" He shook his head. "I haven't sucked off anybody in a toilet. I haven't gone cruising the park, I haven't even gone cruising the Personals."

"Then what kind of guy am I supposed to think you're talking about? You're not the Jehovah Witnesses sort, either."

He didn't answer, was somewhere else behind his eyes. Then he leaned back to watch the pigeons strutting on the sidewalk, sleek heads bobbing as they pecked at promising tidbits.

"I've never understood why so many people hate these birds," he said. "Calling them rats with wings, and like that. What aren't they seeing?"

He was shredding bits of his bread; sowed a generous handful across the concrete. Wary, the pigeons lifted off a moment with a great snapping of wings, then settled back again to feast.

"They're not just gray," he went on. "Look at those colors around their heads. All those different purples. Lavender. Greens, on some of them. Those are beautiful colors. So maybe they shit on statues,

what's to hate?"

"Jared," I said, "I don't want to talk about pigeons now."

He nodded, sweeping more crumbs toward the birds. "There," he told them. "Go shit on a statue for me." Then it was my turn.

"You know one thing I've always envied about you?" he said. "It's the way you can deal with pain. You lock it up and once it's in the box, you never open that box again. You must have skin like an alligator inside."

"Jared…" I said. "You're giving me way too much credit for something I'm not even sure I'm flattered by."

"Don't be ashamed of it. I wish I could cope like you, with all the things that are wrong. I look in your eyes, then I look in the mirror, and I don't see the same quality. I wish I could, but I don't."

"If you've got something to tell me," I said, "quit dancing around the subject and tell it. Who have you met?"

"Aren't you listening? I haven't met anybody."

A pair of sluggish flies buzzed into his bowl of red beans and rice. Impassive, he watched them crawl and feed; seemed capable of watching until their eggs hatched a new generation.

"Everybody has a breaking point," he murmured.

And when I told him he wasn't anywhere near his, that he was stronger than this, Jared didn't even look at me as if to say How would you know? It made me question my credibility. If I conveyed nothing-no confidence, no faith, no belief-because nothing worth conveying was left. If, in experiencing most of the same intimate plagues that life had brought to Jared, the better qualities that were part of my essence hadn't been burned away. Or worse, by my own hand been locked beyond retrieval.

"I'm tired of hurting," he said. "Tired of letting everything hurt me, just taking it, because there's nothing else to do, until I don't have anything left inside for it to grind down. So…

"There's this guy that I've heard about. Walks around looking like something out of Charles Dickens. I don't know what he is, or where he comes from…but he's supposed to make the pain stop."

I went with Jared as he sought his deliverer, not because I necessarily believed in rumors he'd heard, or because if they were true I believed myself capable of dissuading him from rash acts, but simply because I'd convinced myself that he'd be safer this way. The streets could be dangerous; he shouldn't walk them alone.

Like Serge had.

Up streets and down alleys, inside bars and outside liquor stores, beneath neon and through shadows…we followed a winding course of anguish the same as we'd follow a stream. Where it was created and

where it deepened, where it bottomed out and where it became a roaring cascade that swept everything before it.

We talked to hustlers who leaned against graffiti-thick walls or smoked between tricks under the trestles of the elevated train. Talked to runaways who warmed themselves over fires built in rusty oil drums. To castoffs who made homes in boarded-up warehouses, or factories where smokestacks held their last stale dying breath, beneath a sky that still looked irreparably seared.

"Never heard of him" — this we got most often, a relief to me.

"Oh yeah, I heard of that guy" — this, too, sometimes. And:

"Hey, I think I saw him. He's a killer."

"Right. Some kind of saint, right?"

"Fag. Fags."

"You just missed him, by, like, a day."

Never enough to discourage Jared from continuing. Just enough to keep me from feeling sure this was mere rumor.

There seemed to be no end of places to look, and if we began to think we must have covered them all, then we'd find more. More sprawl, more shadow, more derelict hulks etched against sooty new horizons. It made me recall something I'd been told by one of the street people I used to see all the time near the video store, for whom Danielle and I would sometimes buy sandwiches.

The city grows at night, he'd told me. On its own. That's why so many people can pass a spot for the hundredth time and look at some building as if for the first…even if logically they know, from the way it looks, it must've stood there crumbling for sixty, eighty, a hundred years. The only thing they can figure is that it has somehow escaped their notice until now.

The city grows at night, and that's why people can drive past some spot on their way out of the city and think, wait, last week didn't it all used to end right around here? So they decide their memories must be playing tricks on them again, and knit the changes into the way it's always been.

Then most of them don't give it another thought, he told me. But a few can still feel the city's growth pains in the deepest places inside their dreams, and even those who don't remember on awakening, at least awaken with a growing dread of the city and its demands, realizing that it'll never be satisfied until it's consumed everything there is to be had, making slaves of all who live there. Feeders, and those fed into the maw.

He told me these things one day on my lunch break, then lived another month. Died of acute alcohol poisoning two blocks over, in the alley behind a Thai restaurant. But his face was gone, I heard. Rats. And maybe it's only creative hindsight, but now I swear he told

me these things like a man who'd already heard his death searching for him, stalked for dreaming too deeply and brushing dust from the wrong secrets.

He'd said the city had sorted out long ago who it could use to maintain itself, and who would taste best between its teeth.

But why listen to paranoid drunks, anyway?

Hieronymus Beadle recognized intent as soon as he saw them coming, moving with trepidation through the musty Welsh pub until they could see him near the back, sunk comfortably into his chair and drowsing by the fire. During his sumptuous weeks in the city, his waistcoat had grown frightfully snug, buttons a-popping and threads a-straining.

"Sit! Sit!" he bid them. "Been expecting you, I have."

"How's that?" asked the older of the pair, the more prickly; clearly the skeptic, the sniffer out of charlatans.

Mr. Beadle gestured toward the fire. "I've been watching the news, of course."

He could unfailingly spot those who'd made a concerted effort to find him, and such was this pair, if the elder against what he thought to be better judgment. But if that wasn't love, Hieronymus Beadle didn't know what was. Always most touching, when they came two by two.

"Wine?" he offered, showing them the stemmed glasses ranked before the fire, glowing like purplish orbs. "There's no place left to serve it mulled. Criminal, that. I'm forced to do it myself, but if you'll look 'round at the sad state of disrepair here, you'll understand why they're only too happy to allow me the indulgence. Cloves and cardamom, cardamom and cloves. They smooth and mellow, they round off the bite."

"Jared," said the skeptic. "The man's an escapee."

"Perhaps. But is it a true escape after the jail's fallen to ruin? Of course not — it's opportunity seized. Now. Seize some chairs, why don't you? They're not half uncomfortable."

When they moved to sit, he leaned forward as if to shake the skeptic's hand, catching him by surprise and clenching tight.

"Don't mind me, just browsing," he told the man, whose lean and startled face had begun to show the true lines of age and of character, and harder times in sorrow's forge. "You're possessed of a fitness mania to prolong the illusion of youth. You've a cat named…Voodoo, is it? whom you feel you've quite ignored as of late. Your favorite sexual act is mutual oral, but you've never bothered to dig deep enough to understand why. Shall I tell you?"

Always a treat, shocking doubters into silence.

“I’ll take that as a tacit affirmative. Somewhere very, very deep within you, the act you call sixty-nine satisfies a yearning for wholeness in creation. Reminds you of the uroboros, the snake swallowing its own tail. Much more apropos, I say, betwixt two men than man and woman. You’re each half the world to the other then, yes?”

“It’s like that, yeah,” he said, dry-throated, and yanked his hand free.

“How…?” said the one in need. Jared.

“Psychometry, plain and simple. A gaudy parlor trick, though, telling present and past. But the future, now, if I could only have managed that one, why, the world would’ve come to me instead of the other way around.” Hieronymus Beadle smiled, eyes crinkling above plump cheeks. “Still, here you are. You’ve met me halfway, at least. Tell me what carries you through yonder door.”

But he knew already. Spend a few weeks anywhere, and whispers inevitably churned like an undertow to draw out seekers of relief from the torments of existence. They came looking precisely like this Jared: miserable with hope, before the court of last resort.

“I take souls, gentlemen,” he began, sparing himself the need of listening to questions heard a hundred thousand times already. “I’m no devil, I wreak no sulphurous damnation. A humble peddler, am I, a tinker of flesh and spirit. A dying trade, but all I know to practice, and ironically, more needed today than ever before. I take souls. They’re never missed, for with them goes the capacity to miss them. It’s not unlike the snipping of a giant nerve that connects one to a gangrenous appendage. And just as the amputated limb may be burnt without bringing further suffering in the flames, so too will that troublesome soul wither quite on its own, unfelt. I take souls, and give peace in return.”

“And what do you do with them then?” asked the skeptic.

“None of your bloody business.”

Hieronymus Beadle sipped his wine, folded hands over belly, and watched them argue. Once he’d provided his services for kings and princes, sultans and emirs, who’d feared themselves in danger of attack by malign sorcery. They’d paid him fabulous sums for the safekeeping of the stuff of their hearts and dreams, until enemies could be rooted out and destroyed. Quite the comedown, this, for so few believed in true magic anymore, motivated only by hopes of an end to suffering. He refused to blame them. It had been a cruel century, overall.

The argument was over, and Jared unswayed.

“Can you…do it here?” he asked. “Now?”

“Good heavens, no. Don’t be absurd. Souls can’t be handed over

like wallets. They can't be stolen. They must be surrendered willingly, because they cling to the flesh they know, and must be coaxed and bullied into quitting the familiar. Rather exhausting, the process, but then, peace must often be preceded by a war."

"And is there any other…cost?"

"To you? Oh no. The overhead's already been paid." Hieronymus Beadle now regarded the skeptic. "And you, sir? Is there naught I can do for you? Because if you'll pardon my bluntness, I caught quite the potent whiff of soul's gangrene from you, as well, a few minutes ago. Serge, was that the name? Indeed it was."

Mr. Beadle watched him wriggle on temptation's hook.

Some days he felt there to be no honor left in what he did, what had once been a noble trade, suffering no master but his own soul and the short-term dictates of royalty. Never had he dreamt back then that he would one day dance to corporate tunes played by wealthy pipers in their steel towers, overlooking kingdoms of rust and ruin. Serving the beasts they had created, this new generation of city fathers paid bounties in hopes of cleansing each malignant landscape of those who did not fit its dream of what it should be. Purity had always struck him as such a bland and petty goal, yet they worked so tirelessly to achieve it.

He told himself he was still providing a valuable service. In such an age as this, wasn't one's soul a liability, after all?

"Sweet peace, good sir?" he said to the skeptic.

"I don't suppose you can…remove the gangrene, and leave the limb, can you?"

"I fear not. It's to be all or nothing. Rather like severing one's spinal cord."

The man shook his head, as if it took some effort. So close; so very close. Still, Hieronymus Beadle was heartened to see one slip through his grasp. Hope for the future, and all.

"Go to hell," the man said, then clung to his Jared in final appeal, which fell upon deaf ears and a heart already starting to scale.

The next morning was the first in more than two years that I woke up alone. Voodoo, curled in a black and white ball at the end of the bed, didn't count. I've often envied the way cats can sleep with someone, yet still sleep alone.

I laid my hand on Jared's side of the bed, then stood before the window, staring out at streets and signs, at other buildings and other people who stared in turn, all of us framed alone and dead-eyed in our windows like portraits left subtly incomplete.

Jared. He was out there somewhere. Or maybe he was now Jared in name only, no longer the real Jared who delighted in obscure

movies and liked his chest bitten and drew apocalyptic anti-heroes making their ways through worlds that had been leveled around them by warheads or disease or neglect. Maybe that's why he hadn't yet come home, maybe never would. He'd become his own character.

I moved away from the window and lingered before a cluster of his sketches inspired by the title character of El Topo, the movie that had brought us together. Slim-legged, in black, wearing a rider coat that hit him above the knee, this was your archetypical wandering gunslinger, rendered in sharp, scratchy strokes of Jared's pencil. Mostly he roamed the starkest deserts and canyons and blasted city streets. But in one he stood contorted in anguish as bullets splattered his blood onto a wall behind him, already shaded with stains from corrosive rain, while the shadow he cast upon it stood in contrast, the essence of balance and calm.

There was nothing like this in the movie, although I could guess what Jared had been drawing inspiration from: the scene in which El Topo has met the first of four Master Gunfighters, a man who can no longer be wounded because he's learned to render his flesh impervious to gunfire.

"I hardly bleed," he explains. "I do not resist the bullets. I let them pass through the emptiness of my heart."

When Jared and I watched the movie, I suspect that each of us was too afraid to tell the other how deeply we connected with that line. Wishing we could learn such a trick, and teach it to friends and allies, and others whom we loved, so we could at least sharpen our edge against a city that had decided it could do without us.

Our only regret being that, for some, we'd still be too late.

When Serge died, killing him might not have been the initial intent, but things like that so easily get out of hand, it may as well have been premeditated. He was cornered one evening near the mouth of an alley by some cock fascists, four of them, one for each of the cardinal points, so there was no direction to run. Their fun was strictly casual for the first few minutes, using only their fists. Then they got serious. Started in on him with a length of pipe that turned up in the alley.

Somebody who later watched the police inside the yellow-tape corral said that the homicides stood around with coffee, joking over Serge's body. They already knew who he was; a couple of the uniforms on the scene had rousted him with some younger guy a few days earlier, after we'd had an argument. They'd been in a car near his favorite coffeehouse. Now one of the homicides squatted down, inspected Serge's pipe-broken jaw, used a latex-gloved hand to waggle its huge, grotesque skew, and said, "Looks like this cocksucker just

didn't know when to say when."

Four years later his murder remains unsolved. Infer from that what you will.

When newer friends, people who'd never met him, would chance across a picture of us together and ask whatever became of Serge, I usually said he'd moved back down to Tampa. Couldn't stand the cold winters here, the way they seem to start in October and end in April. Used to be I could tell they knew I was lying, that they'd caught the throb of some raw nerve that had escaped cauterization.

Eventually, while I'd told Jared the truth, no one else suspected otherwise.

Sometimes I go scratching at the wound, to make sure I've not forgotten how to feel it. But I have to dig very far down, because only the most deeply concealed nerves still feel flayed and raw, like the tendrils of sea anemones scraped with a wire brush.

The rest, my public nerves, must've become as encrusted as the city.

I used to think this was something to aspire to.

Used to think it was what I wanted…so that somebody else would be forced to look me in the eye someday, and tell me how I'd changed, except he wouldn't speak it like an accusation; rather, with admiration, for all I could withstand.

A few afternoons later I came home from the video store, and he was back. I'd had days to anticipate and dread and rehearse the moment, but had wasted them, too fearful of even contemplating it.

He must've heard me on the stairs, was there waiting as soon as I came through the door. He hadn't forgotten how to smile, but it seemed a reflex, as if he might've forgotten why he'd want to.

"So, it's…done?" I asked.

He nodded.

"What's it like?"

"It's…different. But different isn't bad."

"Did it hurt?"

"Hurt…pain…those really aren't part of my vocabulary now. So I'll just say no." Jared seemed profoundly calm and thoughtful, and when I asked how Hieronymus Beadle had done this thing to him, he recounted it as if telling me about something that had happened to someone else that he'd heard about secondhand.

"He took me to a warehouse, I think it must've been. All you have to do, really, is look in his eye, but that's where any sense of time falls apart. I know I walked around some afterward, but I still don't know how long I've been gone.

"You just look in his eye, and he won't let you look away, no

matter how much you want to. He's taking everything you hate most about yourself, and that scares you about whatever might be ahead, and turning it right back at you. Taking you through it all, but a hundred times worse than you dreamed it could be…until you just… give up. Then he kisses you, and it feels like he could suck away every breath you ever breathed. And then you sleep. Or I did.

"But I think it's solved a lot of the problems I was having. I think I'll be easier to live with now."

Jared shrugged, turned away to leave me wondering what life with him could possibly be like now. What life might've been like elsewhere, in a place that never existed but we'd spoken of just the same, where bigots were few and the diseases all had cures.

We used to joke about it, our own private Israel, a queer homeland.

But on second thought, that'd just make it easier for all the righteous fuckers, who brought picket signs to funerals, to raise their own air force and deploy bombers.

I followed Jared toward the bedroom, where he'd disappeared, and halfway down the hall I stooped to pick up a pair of feathers. Small and pale gray, they took me back to that day at the beanery when Jared had told me of the man he needed to find, and how he'd fed crumbs to pigeons, asking why they were so hated by so many.

The bedroom floor was dusted with them, so many feathers a pillow might have been ripped open. But pillows don't bleed. Live birds do. Feathers and tatters of flesh lay clumped about the room. Wet pawprints were tracked everywhere, while here and there larger heaps of meat were still intact enough to recognize, with bent wings and scaly stick legs. The tiny strewn organs glistened bright red, the pocks of shit a chalky white.

Jared was sitting in the middle of the mess, before the open window, through which a cold autumn breeze was blowing, scattering feathers like chaff.

"Look what I can do," Jared said, as he watched Voodoo burrow his fangs deeper into the cavity of a shredded abdomen. "Nothing. I can do nothing."

One reason I've always enjoyed talking with Danielle at the video store is her accent. She originally came from Alabama, and there's something about a Southern accent that can infuse sorrow with enough whimsy to make it tolerable. She once told me that lesbians didn't get beaten up in her town, the same as boys were, because they presented too keen a challenge to most red-blooded hetero guys, who knew they had the proper cure between their legs.

"So I started carrying this big old dildo in my purse, about two

sizes past horse," she'd told me. "And whenever one of these guys'd tell me I didn't know what I was missing, I'd pull out Mr. Ed and tell the guy if he could top this, he was on."

She was one of the few I'd told the truth about Serge, and so filling her in on Jared made sense to me, and then it made more sense to keep going and tell her that it was a temptation to take to the streets again. Hunt down that peculiar man in his top hat and walking stick, and let him work his anesthetizing magic on me, too. And then it would no longer matter that the flesh I loved and fit best with was now emptied of the stuff that had first made it so appealing. Such terrible temptation.

"I never told you about when I came out to my family, did I?" Danielle asked.

I told her I didn't think so.

"When he found out about me, my daddy called me an accident of birth," she said. "Scarcely said a word to me for the next two years. Didn't even want to look at me, and us in the same room, why, you'd think we were strangers. And I suspect I suddenly was, to him. An accident of birth. Got so I played it for a joke, and I'd stand all quiet-like around a corner, lying in wait for him to come face to face with me, so I could see him squirm, just like a wiggle worm on a hot sidewalk."

I wondered which was worse: someone who abandons you in the flesh, or one who does it while remaining under the same roof.

"But I see things a little different now," Danielle admitted. "We're all accidents of birth, every one of us. Born in the wrong place, or at the wrong time. In the wrong body, or to the wrong set of people. No matter who you are, there'll be something not right. So that all just becomes part of the game, then — there's no malice in it. And the rest of the game? It's putting those things as right as you can."

She reached down to hold my hand. Lifted it up, kissed it, put it back where she'd found it.

"But you don't go throwing away what's not broken," she said, "not unless you got something better to take its place. Nature does abhor a vacuum, you know."

I told her I'd try to remember that.

Danielle liked the fit of her own body just fine, so there'd been no accidents there.

But sometimes I still wished she was a guy.

I don't see Jared anymore.

He left a couple of days after the thing with the pigeons. If it hurt to see him go, it was only because it was a physical echo of what had already happened. Jared was gone before he ever walked out the

door, maybe even before he'd heard of the strange man who traversed the worst streets and called to those in pain, offering them an easy way out. Maybe he was gone long before any of it, part of him beaten to death as surely as Serge had been.

So I don't see Jared anymore.

A few nights after he left, I went to sleep wondering what Hieronymus Beadle did with the souls he collected, and in a dream I saw him strolling ponderously away from the city, bloated almost to the point of bursting with his cargo. He walked and sweated blood and walked and mopped his brow and walked until the city lay far behind. At a copse of trees, he stopped, stripped the clothes from his swollen body, and strained and shuddered. They poured from within him like a sickness, those souls, something between liquid and vapor, seeking safety in the ground below; some anchor to cling to. Then, much slimmer, his reservoirs depleted, he put his clothes back on and strolled onward, with purpose, while from the ground on which he'd voided grew rose bushes. The petals were so perfect they nearly resembled faces, and seemed to scream when another man came along, with white hair and a leathery patrician face, and snipped each bud from its stem. He'd toss each one over his shoulder, or drop them to the ground, and when he was done and the bushes were bare, he smiled while a herd of coarse-bristled, tusked pigs burst from deeper within the trees. They squealed and rooted and stamped and slashed, until every last blossom had been devoured, and then, grunting, they lumbered back into the shadows while the white-haired autocrat patted their crusty dark hides.

I was shaking when I woke up, as though I'd seen something I wasn't supposed to. It was a long time before I could get back to sleep, or even wanted to, afraid I might see Jared on hands and knees, fueled by regret and emptiness, rooting in the piles of pigshit, saying, "I know it's here. I know it's here someplace."

But I don't see Jared anymore.

He's around, though. I've seen the writing on the wall.

It was weeks before I made the connection, entertaining the notion that the painted silhouettes which had begun appearing on building walls had come from Jared's hand. No two were the same, black silhouettes as crisp as shadows thrown by someone who could have been standing right next to you, but wasn't. Each one looked tensed, as if startled by the coming of something that cast no shadow of its own. There was one on our building, one on Terry's. One inside the alley where Serge had been murdered. Others, and I wondered if they'd been chosen at random, or if they too had some special significance.

Now and then I'd hear people talk about them, wherever people

lingered, and the silhouettes were spoken of with great curiosity. Where they'd come from, what they meant. Everyone loves a mystery.

But no one else had been privy to the things that Jared found most significant when he looked at the world. No one else had sat with him one evening while he paged through a book, horrified and fascinated by photos shot fifty years earlier in the wastelands of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, of the silhouettes of human beings that had been seared onto walls at the instant of the bomb blasts.

What if those were their souls, he'd wondered, souls yearning in that instant of sublime and blinding violence for some record of their passing, even as their bodies were vaporized.

It gave us something to think about.

And now, every day, I look at the silhouette he painted on the side of our building, hoping I'll find it gone. Hoping against all rationality that in the night it will have peeled itself free of the bricks, and gone seeking the flesh where it so rightfully belongs.

But even if I get my wish, what a long search it has ahead.

The city grows at night, and I don't see Jared anymore.

* * *

Brian Hodge has published six novels, *Dark Advent, Oasis, Nightlife, Deathgrip, The Darker Saints* and *Prototype,* and close to seventy short stories and novelettes in a wide variety of magazines and anthologies. His first collection of tales, *The Convulsion Factory,* was themed around the idea of urban decay and was a finalist nominee for the Bram Stoker Award. A second collection, *Falling Idols,* features stories with spiritual and outré religious themes. When he's not playing the didjeridoo, Hodge reviews music and books and has been scripting for comics publisher Verotik. About 'Little Holocausts' he says: 'My girlfriend and I had driven through several hours of cold autumn rain to spend a weekend with a houseful of friends. As soon as we arrived, we learned that the long-time partner of one of the friends we'd expected to be there had died the night before, of AIDS complications. So we went back out into the rain with everyone else to attend the wake. I'd not yet met the man who died, and would not have recognized him from a picture that I saw, he'd changed so. After the wake, several of us went to the apartment he'd shared with our friend — the home where he'd died — and we ate and drank and laughed and told stories, the way you do at these times. You laugh a lot. At one point I walked into

the empty kitchen for another Heineken and noticed a box of adult diapers, waiting to go out to the trash, no longer needed. In its implications, that sight was just the most heartbreaking thing. The whole story came out of that moment. That, and this climate of intolerance we live in that never really seems to go away.'

Fat Mary
JULIAN RATHBONE

It was, I suppose, a small thatched cottage, but you don't see them like that any more — a two roomed cabin, made of mediaeval daub — a mixture of cow-dung and fine gravel, terracotta-coloured where the whitewash had peeled off. The thatch was dark brown, covered with blackish moss, roof-tree sagging. There was nothing picturesque about it at all, no briar-roses, no hollyhocks. Thin chickens squabbled over the dusty yard, a white lean rooster with a spare handful of tail feathers racketed amongst them, occasionally fucking them. The hens paid no attention, often just went on desperately pecking at the ground for a grain or seed they might have missed.

There was a shed, a barn and a stable. In the stable, in a stall too small for her, a fat old sow suckled six out of eight piglets. She had eaten the two runts along with all the afterbirths in order to have milk for the others.

There was a pond, shrunk in July, within a saucer of chocolate-coloured cracked mud, sheeted with emerald green algae and beside it a dung-heap which heaved with thin white worms.

It was all set at the top end of a narrow coombe at the end of a chalky track that threaded the three ten-acre fields she had. The steep sides of the downs were filled with beech and birch woods, but the back end was crowned with an ancient yew forest, planted by Henry VIII to provide longbows. Too late someone told him about gunpowder so the trees were never used.

We crouched in hiding on the edge of the beech wood, James and I, watched, waited and speculated. We were pupils at Minster Hill, a boarding school that claimed to be a public school. Minster Hill prided itself on its progressive approach to education so, on Saturday and Sunday afternoons, we were let out to walk around the countryside at will.

We were wearing the summer uniform — grey Vyella shirts with sleeves rolled up, grey corduroy shorts, very baggy and loose, wollen stockings, sandals. The sandals were impractical, but there we were, there was nothing we could do about that. I wore a sheathed SS dagger my uncle had brought back from Germany. The hilt was wound with silver wire and there was a swastika on the centre of the cross-guard. I carried it under my shirt when we left the school buildings, but threaded the sheath on to my belt as soon as we were clear.

It was a hot sultry day. The flies were a bother. We headed into the woods and searched out rotten silver birch trees, which, we had discovered, could be pushed over. Often you had to rock them first, then they would begin to crack, and at last they'd topple. Occasionally they would break in three or four places up the trunk and concertina down around us in a flurry of soft umber shards and dust. When we couldn't find any more trees that would go, I took out my SS knife and we practised throwing it at the trunks of the beech trees. These were grey and wrinkled and put me in mind of the giant legs of huge elephants. It wasn't easy to make the point stick in. You could either throw it point first in one sweeping underarm movement, a method which worked over short distances. Or, over five yards or more, we held it by the point and made it turn in the air three times or more, always hoping the point would hit the tree first. Sometimes it did.

After a time, when our throats were dry and prickly and an itchy sweat was building up inside the Vyella shirts, we sat awkwardly on the ground, undid our buttoned flies and pulled our pricks into the warm air. We did it to ourselves, not to each other. There was no passion in this, not even much friendliness. Indeed, back at school James and I were in different forms, different dormitories, kept away from each other, though occasionally we exchanged expressionless, unblinking glances when we met.

James was a dark, saturnine lad, pretty in a sort of Spanish or Levantine way, with olive skin and a mop of black hair. He said little, seemed to live in a world of his own.

When we'd done that we pushed on down the hill, through the trees, to the electric fence that bounded the highest of Fat Mary's fields. And while we waited for her to appear (something which did not always happen) we rehearsed the myths that surrounded her, adding our own embellishments and speculations, and listened to the five second pulse on her wire — enough to keep her three Jersey cows in and the deer out.

'She weighs sixteen stone.'

'More like twenty.'

'The hair on her chin is bristly.'

'So is the hair between her legs.'

'Her bosoms are great fat sacks of pink blancmange.'

'With giant strawberries for nipples.'

In those days even to say words like 'bosoms' and 'nipples' was a thrill, a *frisson,* at any rate.

'Her bottom is huge. Bigger than the two biggest melons you ever saw. '

'Far bigger. And her bum-hole is a black pit.'

'Her feet are rotting and smell like over-ripe Camembert. '

But we weren't that interested in her feet.

'On very hot days she takes off all her clothes and walks around with nothing on.'

'On one very very hot day she made Smithson-Haig go into her bedroom and do it to her.'

'So he says.'

'Don't you believe him?'

'Not really.'

'Nor do I.'

I pulled a long succulent stalk of milky barley grass, easing it from its cellulose sheath. I sucked it, then chewed.

'Would you?' I asked. 'Would you go into her house if she asked you?'

'Yes. If you came too.'

'And do it to her?'

'I don't know about that.'

The distant chug and rattle of a pre-war bull-nosed Morris had us looking back down the track. Changes in the note and speed of the engine and we knew that just out of sight, around the corner of the woods, Fat Mary had got out of the car, opened her five-bar gate, driven through, and closed it behind her. And here she came, driving between the fences, leaving a thin slipstream of chalk dust mingling with the black of her exhaust. A second fence and a second gate, then she half-circled the foetid pond and came to a standstill outside her tumble-down lattice-work porch. Hens and rooster scurried away towards the barn, the cows looked up from their pasture above her, a very large and mangy ginger tom woke up from wherever he had been sleeping and pushed his chin and cheek against the rough lisle of her stockings.

She was huge. And in spite of the July heat she was wearing a tweed suit, the heavy skirt cut long below her knees, the jacket mannish, very sensible shoes on her feet, and a sort of battered felt trilby on her head. She had gingery straw-coloured hair which was probably quite long since it was always bound up in a large bun above her neck, beneath the trilby. Her shoulders were broad and heavy, her back a rounded wall beneath the tweed. Her bosoms, behind a not over-clean white blouse and a structured bra or corset, forced the lapels of the jacket apart above one strained button. Her hands were like dinner plates with pink uncooked sausages for fingers.

Although we could scarcely make out her face, we had seen her in Sherborne on market days and knew that it was broad, once fair, now red with weather, with broken capillaries on the cheeks, small pale blue eyes widely spaced but almost lost beneath heavy lids, a spread

stubby nose, a big mouth with rubbery lips and discoloured but otherwise large and healthy teeth. She had a large mole beneath the corner of her mouth, and yes, it did nourish bristly hair. Her voice was deep, as mannish as her jacket and shoes, the accent touched with Dorset, but not incomprehensibly broad.

She got out of the car, went round to the boot and hoisted a sack from it, feed of some sort, perhaps, or fertilizer, certainly a hundredweight. Grasping it around its waistless middle she carried it, not with ease but certainly without much difficulty, into the barn. Then she came back, wiping her hands down the sides of her massive hams, and plucked wicker baskets filled with brown-paper-wrapped or bagged shopping out of the back of the car. She put most of it on her doorstep, then reached to a ledge inside the porch for a big iron key and let herself into the cottage.

I batted flies off my forehead, eased my knees away from the coarse grass that had imprinted a network of ridges into them, and ran my tongue across my top lip.

'Come on,' I said, and stood up. 'Show's over.'

James looked back at me, up over his shoulder.

'Maybe. Maybe not.'

'What do you mean?'

'Follow me.'

And, bent double, he scouted along the fence and back into the wood. I followed him, but made a less than elaborate attempt to keep hidden. He pushed on, always near the fence to the meadow, and round to the top of the coombe and so into the edge of the yew forest. This was very different from the wood and I wasn't too happy about going into it.

In the first place it was dark and gloomy and cool — after the heat, almost chilly. Almost nothing grew beneath the low heavy branches, leaving exposed a steep slope of dusty earth, flint stones and chalk. Amongst the dark oily green of the needles yew berries hung like drops of blood. These were obscene — first because they were notoriously very poisonous, but also because of their form. Each was a tiny succulent cup of red flesh nursing inside it a seed. At one and the same time they suggested to the adolescent mind the glans and foreskin of a nearly tumescent penis and some hazy speculative idea of what the parts of a girl might be like. If you squeezed the flesh they exuded a colourless ichor, balanced somewhere between stickiness and slime, which matched exactly the tiny drop of fluid that could hang on the end of your prick when it lost tumescence without ejaculation.

You must remember that all this took place fifty years ago when, for an adolescent boy in a boarding school, anything to do with sex

was cloaked in ignorance and imbued with compulsively attractive feelings of deep, dark guilt.

But there was a second reason why the yew forest was a place of very ill omen. Twice, four years and two years previously, boys from Minster Hill had been found hanging from their belts from one of those dark, seamed boughs. The forensic details of their deaths had not been made public, though in both cases it was rumoured that sexual activity had preceded death and verdicts of suicide while the balance of the mind was disturbed were returned by a bemused and horrified jury. On both occasions the school Chaplain had used his sermon on the Sunday following the inquests to attack, in coded terms, the practice of masturbation, dwelling on the feelings of shame that could follow, a shame intense enough to make a young lad take his own life.

None of this seemed to bother James though he did keep to the lower edge of the forest. Presently he edged forward again as far as the fence that overlooked the meadow and, this time, the rear of Fat Mary's smallholding. We were much closer than we had been before, not much more than a hundred yards away, and looking down on a graveyard of agricultural machinery.

An old tractor rotted away on huge flat tyres, the multiple tines of an ancient harrow looked like the ribs of a giant dead fish, the rust-red discs of a plough like saurian vertebrae. Grass and brambles grew through them, willow herb too, in spikes of dark pink bloom, and sorrel already brown and crusted with friable seeds. Long ago Fat Mary's father and brothers had ploughed two of the fields each year and grown rape and flax, barley and oats. The brothers died in Burma, in the forgotten army, Mother hanged herself, Daddy died of drink. Fat Mary survived on and by the animals she reared and let the fields return to pasture.

There was also an ancient pump mounted on a fluted cast-iron column — the only water supply she had. And just then, as we settled down to watch again, the back door opened and she came out.

She had taken off all her clothes.

She went to the pump, worked the long handle, filled a bucket, tipped it over her head. Then she did the same again. Next, she scrubbed herself all over with a huge bar of green Fairy soap, before washing the suds away with a third bucketful. The fourth she took to the lean-to toilet shed at the end of the building. We fancied we could hear her pissing. Then she went back indoors. All in all she had been visible to us for about five minutes.

She was magnificent. In the bright, hot July sun her body glowed pearl and rose and a deeper red where her clothes had been too tight. Her neck was an ivory tree-trunk, her shoulders were like fat rounded

hams. As she worked the pump, her huge breasts swung like sacks of cream netted in blue veins and nippled with discs like saucers. Once, while pumping, she straightened and used her wrist to wipe the sweat from her brow which was streaked with her coarse, gingery hair and for a moment, upright, with her huge torso tilted back a little, she was a goddess.

When she tipped the flashing water over herself it slid through the suds, driving them down, and the acres of her skin looked sleek and strong like a whale's. Her huge dimpled buttocks were so pressed together that the cleft was not obvious, until she put her hand between to soap inside, and when she turned her stomach hung like a stuffed hammock and all but buried in shadow the multiple creases beneath and the flattened triangle of straw.

But for all the flabbiness of her body, torso, breasts and buttocks, her limbs, though massive, were strong and round and firm, dimpled again at knees and elbows, but structured by the muscle and sinew deep beneath, the power house that could carry not only her own weight but made nothing or not much of an extra hundredweight, or split the massive logs that were stacked against the wall of her cabin.

The long and the short of it was — I fell in love.

Well, what's your definition of that miserable state?

I had never before seen female naked flesh beyond what the pre-bikini swimming costumes of the late nineteen forties (which included hideous rubber bathing caps) allowed. I had no, or hardly any, preconceptions of what constitutes female beauty or what in a female body might stimulate sexual desire. Even the air-brushed or eclectically posed women in *Health and Efficiency* were plump by today's standards. I had, moreover, been taken to the National Gallery where a visit to Dutch maritime paintings, de Cuyp cows and trompe-l'ceil interiors, all deemed to be aesthetically uplifting, could not be undertaken without a hurried passage through the Rubens rooms. And Fat Mary was not that much fatter than the Goddesses poor Paris had to choose between. So, there was no reason to be repelled by her size.

And the attraction? Fantasy made flesh and dwelling, if not amongst us, then little more than three miles away. As soon as the plank door closed behind her I knew I had to see her again. The summer holidays came and that image haunted me. Surreptitiously I drew crude pictures of her and hid them from my parents. I willed dreams of her and sometimes was visited by her in unwilled dreams. By September, when we returned to school, I was obsessed. I haunted the market and caught glimpses of her in her tweeds, which, perhaps oddly, did nothing to put me off. I just stood in front of her, gawped,

turned bright crimson, and imagined what I knew lay beneath. Only one thing bothered me and I pushed that away as an absurd irrelevance — I knew she must be at least twenty years older than me, possibly as much as twenty-five. You cannot now imagine how the repression and ignorance of anything concerning sex and the female body poisoned our minds in those days and led to such deep and foetid infatuations.

The weather turned chill, the leaves turned and dropped, and I shivered on the edge of the yew forest whenever I was allowed out and sometimes when I was not, filled with despair because I knew that even if I caught a glimpse of her, I stood no chance at all of seeing her undressed. I came on my own now, though once or twice I fancied James was maybe behind me in the woods. In school we saw even less of each other than before — with the new school year timetables had been changed, and hierarchies redrawn following the summer end-of-term exams. He was now in the Remove, would be sixteen before he took School Certificate and did woodwork instead of Latin. I had sold or bartered my SS dagger in the way boys do, but I had heard that it had passed on two or three more times and that James now owned it.

But none of this was important. What kept me awake at nights and patrolling those fences even when the frosts came and the pond below froze was the obsession, the overwhelming desire to see Fat Mary naked again, and. And what? I hardly dared imagine. Yet believe it or not it was not until December, late December, just three days before Minster Hill broke up, that I remembered that day in July, how we had seen her let herself in with a big iron key taken from a high ledge in the porch. It was a Saturday morning again, first light and that cold greyness in the high sash windows that told you it had snowed in the night even before you looked out. I lay there on my back with my eyes open listening to the grumbles of my companions as they too woke up, and then their exclamations of delight as they saw the snow, and all I could say to myself, over and over again was — 'I can get in, I can get in whenever I want.'

My footsteps squeaked in the bright cold snow as I tramped up her track, between the fences. The only other marks were the tyre treads from where she had driven out. The sun was no more than a red disc in a mauve-grey sky. Everything was still and silent but for the sound of my footsteps and breathing. Not even the rooks cackled above the beech trees, nor did the rooster call from Fat Mary's yard. It had been a heavy fall, covering the patch of sprouts to the left of her door so they looked like dwarfs or munchkins. It lay thick on the thatch of her roof though a thin wisp of white smoke rose from the

one stove-pipe chimney. Icicles hung by the wall and from the eaves of her outbuildings. I was cold, desperately cold — a raincoat, a jacket and shoes instead of sandals, were the only concessions to winter that we were allowed. We even remained in short trousers. Of course, clothes rationing was still in force.

Inside the porch I reached up to the ledge that ran along the side just where the plank roof met the trellis sides and yes, there it was. Suddenly I realized that part of me had hoped all along that it would not be there. You know how they say 'his heart was in his mouth'? Mine was. And my knees had turned to jelly. Almost I hoped the key, black, six inches long, would not work, or jam, or something. But no, it turned, quite smoothly, no problem. And yes, the door did creak, indeed, resisted for a moment before its corner squealed across stone flags.

The first thing that hit me was the warmth, and the second was the smell. The first was welcome. I was not so sure about the second. It was a heavy concoction of different things, though predominant at first was pork fat, sour, heavy, insistent. It seemed to be in everything. Indeed on almost all the surfaces there was a hazy greasy slime, yellowish in colour, that seemed to be the essence of cooked or rendered pig. But it was undercut by other odours — baking, cooked greens, hot metal, tom cat, all almost as bad, but lavender, stored apples, and warm old age as well, breathed out from the ancient dark furniture. There was no electricity of course, but Fat Mary had left an oil lamp on the large kitchen table — turned low, but to eyes coming out of the encroaching winter gloom, bright enough.

The one room was divided by a beam in the ceiling with heavy brown velvet curtains hanging from it, left three-quarters open. The first room was kitchen and living-room combined. Against the end wall beneath the stove-pipe a full kitchen range whose fire glowed behind the ventilation flues in its door was set back in a big alcove that once must have been a fireplace, with another huge black old beam as its mantle. The tick of its ancient clock was marked by a cut-out boat set in the dial in which stood a cowled Death. His scythe swung back and forth with each double tick-tock.

On either side of the range there were cupboards and shelves, and more shelves along the back wall, with a dresser too. Impossible to take in all that I could see, but what stood out were huge greasy jars containing bottled or pickled pig trotters, and, in the largest, a pig's head — boned so it looked like a deflated football. Yet it had eyelashes, and sight seemed to gleam through the dark slits between its lids.

Backing away I found myself in the bedroom which was almost filled by the hugest bed I had ever seen, together with a massive

wardrobe, a chest of drawers, and a full length mirror on a swivel, its glass clouded and blackened where the silvering had dropped away. But it was the bed that I could not take my eyes off. It must have been six feet by six feet at least, piled with blankets, old eiderdowns and grey sheets with a heap of pillows and bolsters against the wall at the far end. Above it, clinging to the rough-cast wall beneath a ceiling of planks, swathes of blackened cobwebs hung like the tied-back drapes of a Princess's bed.

I did, still do, suffer from severe arachnophobia.

At that moment I heard the noise of her motor.

She knew I was there of course — first the footprints in the snow, going one way only, then of course the door, closed as I had left it, yes, but with the big key still in the key-hole. I heard the door slam, the meow of the cat, the crunch of her galoshes in the snow. And suddenly I was faced with a question which had loomed like a thundercloud on the horizon, but which I had refused to face, ever since I had left the school buildings: What was I there for? Why had I come? To see her. To see her with no clothes on, as I had seen her in the summer. And?

There was only one place to go. I dived on to the bed and burrowed my way in like a worm burrowing into sand, in amongst those heavy quilts, damp but warm sheets, mountainous bolsters. At this point I should say I was small for my age and very thin and I fancy that before she was properly in I was invisible. I could hear her moving about, putting down bags and so forth, and presently I lifted a corner of the foetid mound I was under and managed to peep out.

She had already turned up the wick of the lamp and lit a couple of candles too. She had her back to me, was in front of a wall mirror to the side of the range, drawing a long hat pin out of her hat and hair. As she lifted the hat off her head her hair tumbled down to the shoulders of her rubberized mackintosh. She set hat and pin to one side on a dresser then filled a kettle from a tall jug, enamelled iron, the enamel chipped, and set it on the hob.

'I know you're there,' she said. Of course she did. 'In the bed are you? I'll be with you presently.' And slowly, deliberately, she began to undress.

First the rubberized mackintosh, then a long tartan scarf. Next the tweed jacket, then a moth-damaged woolly that had once been purple. She released the bottom of her blouse from the skirt band, undid the buttons, shrugged out of it. I could now see her massive freckled shoulders criss-crossed with straps and some of her back above a voluminous slip or petticoat. Reaching behind those sausage-like fingers neatly unhooked and unbuttoned (no zips) the fastenings of her skirt. She stepped out of it, then shrugged and pushed at the straps

of the slip (which was made of some shiny material, satin perhaps, though stained and grubby) and stepped out of that. She was now clad only in a flesh coloured corset, bloomers, and thick stockings whose tops disappeared beneath the bloomers.

The kettle boiled, she reached up for a tin caddy, made tea. She poured out two mugfuls, topped them up with condensed milk from an already opened tin, and added a good slurp of brown cooking brandy to each. She carried them towards the bed and put them down on the chest of drawers then, with one swift movement pulled back the covers and looked down at me.

'You might,' she said, 'have taken your shoes off.'

I was shivering, not with cold but fright.

'Here. Drink this.'

It should have been foul, but it was very sweet. The brandy fumes made my head swim even before I tasted it.

'Drink it all'

I did as I was told.

'Take your clothes off.'

I removed the coats and shoes, then she pushed me on to my back. Her fingers danced like elephants over my shirt and trouser buttons. Finally she unthreaded my belt and put it to one side.

'What a thin little shrimp you are!'

Did she mean all of me or just my not fully mature prick?

And that was all she said. From then on she just grunted or sighed as she pushed me about, got me into the positions she wanted, so she could play out what I soon realized was her fantasy, not mine.

When I was naked, and clutching my genitals out of terrible embarrassment, she pulled me into the middle of the bed, turned me on to my back with my head in the middle of the bed but facing into the room, then heaped the heavy odoriferous covers over me so I was in a heavy black cave of damp warmth. A moment or two later she crawled in at the far end and I could feel her burrowing over me, on hands and knees, her hands on either side of my body moving up towards my head, her knees following her hands. She too was naked now and I could feel the huge softness of her flesh, her great swinging breasts, the floppy folds of her stomach, then the rich farmy odours of her lower parts as they all travelled up over me in the dark until my head was between her knees and then her shins.

She adjusted the covers and for a moment I caught a shadowy glimpse of her mountainous buttocks upside down as it were above my head, then her hands came back between her spread legs and caught hold of my head. And she began to pull. She began to drag me through the narrow gap between her thighs. I thought she was going to pull my head off.

This may seem funny to read, but it was not at all funny at the time. I was terrified, and suddenly in some pain. My shoulders snagged against the backs of her legs, I was suffocating. I pushed my body up and along following my neck and head, using a scrabbling sort of motion with my feet, and then had the sense to twist on to my side so my shoulders could follow my head. I squeezed one hand through that narrow but soft quivering gap, beneath her private parts, and for a moment I could feel the hair, moist, wet even, and breathing honeyed, soured odours, as it rubbed along my cheek and neck.

All this time she was moaning and groaning, puffing and panting. Of course I can see now what she was doing, but I had no idea at the time, no idea at all that she was simulating child-birth.

With my head and shoulders through she straightened somewhat and the covers fell even more away. She got her hands in my armpits, and pushing her knees apart, with one last enormous sigh, pulled me through as far as my waist, leaving only my pelvis and legs still in the gap beneath her. She now had me sitting, with her arms round my back in a huge bear-hug, her bottom spread on either side of my thighs and my face buried in her stomach beneath her breasts so I still had to struggle for breath through all that flesh, and for a moment we stayed like that, and she rocked us both a little from side to side. Her groans and moans had now become cooing sighs which I could hear rumble purringly deep in her chest. By now I was terrified. I cannot say how terrified I was.

With her feet on the floor at the end of the bed she now lifted herself and with one more heave had me free enough to haul my legs out and on to her lap. Gathering her great wrinkled, floppy, vein-laced breast in one hand she thrust a plate-like nipple into my face. Some primaeval if forgotten urge made me suck. There was, of course, no milk, but there was comfort in the floppy saltiness of it which presently hardened a little between my teeth. She pressed my still snorting nose into it with one ham of a hand while the other ran over my head, down my neck and fondled, and squeezed my ribs until I felt they would crack.

And for a moment, perhaps even for a minute or two or more, my fear fell away and I felt warm, happy, secure..

Then, the sow that eats its farrow, she began to strangle me.

She retrieved my belt and with one hand threaded a noose through the buckle. She slipped it over my head, gave the end a twist or two to get a good grip on it, while with the other arm she wrapped me in a bear-hug which pinned my arms to my sides. Then she tightened the noose, slowly.

The first effect was to impede the flow of blood to and from my head and the second was to make me terribly aware of my prick. Until

then the experience had not been for me an overtly sexual one. Now it very definitely was. The tumescence felt like a great throbbing hard… I don't know, cucumber or something. And then, as the darkness filled my head, and my lungs at last began to feel they'd burst, something gave and I let myself go in an orgasm the like of which I had never experienced until then. Or since. And with it everything fell apart. Her arms dropped from the killing embrace and I felt, beneath all the fat, how her muscles suddenly tautened into a terrible convulsion. They relaxed as swiftly as they had tensed and a great gout of warm liquid splashed over my head and shoulders before she toppled backwards, taking me with her.

Somehow I knew — from the smell, the iron taste of it, the viscosity, that she was drenching me in blood, her own blood, and that if only I could loosen the belt I might live.

I tried to struggle but she did too, and I could see now the hilt of what had been my SS dagger, which now belonged to James, protruding from her neck. But though the blood was pulsing up around it she still had strength and will and was ready to fight on, but at that moment a dark shadow seemed to flit across the room and there was James himself. He plucked the knife from her neck before she could and rammed it again and again into her neck and breasts until the flow of blood ceased to throb, became a sluggish stream, and stopped.

At last I loosened the belt. Or James did. I can't remember which. I sat up and looked down and across her. She was on her back, half propped up on all those heavy covers and eiderdowns, her arms still twitching convulsively in front of her tortured, fear-filled face, the fingers groping towards the dagger which was again stuck in the crimson tide that flowed across her chest and into the wide valley between her breasts, which were now flopped outwards. For a moment she stared at the two of us, first one then the other, her small blue eyes baleful, filled with hate. Then she pulled in one last huge breath, let it out and blood bubbled with it from her mouth. She gave a long shudder which ended on a croaking sigh, her legs flopped apart and she was gone, as dead as the pigs whose throats she cut each autumn, whose fat she rendered down and whose joints she carved, baked, cured and pickled.

Later the post mortem report said that one only of the many wounds had killed her. The upward thrust of the dagger, whether thrown from close to or administered with a stab, had neatly passed between the central column of oesophagus and wind pipe and the sinew to the side, finding and severing the carotid artery, draining the blood from her brain.

James loosened the belt and I managed at last to get to my feet.

He handed me a large threadbare towel and I began to wipe myself. The big ginger tom appeared from under the bed and began to rub up against Fat Mary's shin. The door, which James had only managed to pull to behind him, flew open and a flurry of icy snow whirled round the room, hissed on the range. Tom disappeared under the bed again.

'We'd better get back to school,' said James. He pulled the knife out of Fat Mary's throat, wiped it on a sheet. I suppose he's still got it. If he's still around. It all happened fifty years ago, half a century.

'You should wash up as well as you can so no blood gets on your clothes,' he went on. 'There's no reason for anyone to know we were here.'

He was right. It was two days before she was found — the first to call was a gamekeeper drawn by the lowing of cows that had not been milked and the bellows of a sow that had not been fed and whose litter was, by then, too big to eat.

* * *

Julian Rathbone published his first book in 1967 and says he has lost count of those published in the intervening two decades, although it is of the order of twenty-five novels, mostly thrillers with a broadly political/green or social slant. There are also some literary/historical works (two of which were shortlisted for the Booker Prize), a handful of short stories, scripts for German television movies and some poetry; but until now, no horror fiction. His most recent novels, *Intimacy* and *Blame Hitler,* are both published by Gollancz. '"Fat Mary",' Rathbone says, 'started life as the black episode in an erotic picaresque novel that really got no further than the planning stage before being ditched. Reworking the basic idea (a sort of Hansel and Gretel) I realized I was tapping some half-remembered fantasy from boarding school days, back in the 1950s. Fantasy, but with a germ of fact in there somewhere too? At all events, I have welcomed the chance horror brings of breaking out of a too narrowly naturalistic approach to fiction writing. Having also recently concluded forty years of over-indulgence in booze, I was relieved to find whilst writing "Fat Mary" that the Muse does not necessarily need priming with alcohol before delivering the goods.'

The Last Reel
DENNIS ETCHINSON

As soon as I saw her face, I knew where I was.

I'd been lost in the canyons, looking for a sign, and after a while all I wanted was out. I couldn't even read the map book. The dome light flickered like a firefly in a jar and the streetlamps were hidden behind a scrim of leaves and branches. If there really was a street called Rose Petal Lane I couldn't find it.

Then I made the turn on to Sierra Vista and there she was, bigger than life.

It was hard to judge distances but she must have been about a half-mile away, floating through the darkness over the trees that pointed towards the old reservoir at the top. From here I figured her face was at least ten feet tall, which made her mouth roughly the size of an open manhole. I didn't want to think about the rest of her. But I had come this far — what was the point in turning back now?

I downshifted, grinding gears, and kept moving.

The sky grew bright with the glow of her skin and the waterfall of blonde hair around her face. Her head bobbed up and down like a flesh-coloured Zeppelin looking for a place to land. As I got closer there were other colours too, drifting in and out of a long beam of light trained on the reservoir wall. The numbers were worn off the curb but I knew I had found Donn Hedgeman's house. Who else would use the side of the Stone River Dam for a movie screen? I'd heard that his parties were legendary. The man had outdone himself this time.

I had to park halfway back down the canyon. Porsches and Jags and Mercedes-Benzes were wedged across every driveway between here and Sunset. Walking up, I saw two college boys in red vests on one of the sidestreets, waving flashlights like ushers at a movie premiere. Somehow I had missed the valet parking. It was just as well. My Toyota hadn't been washed in months.

On foot, I could have found Donn's house with my eyes closed. It was only eight o'clock but already the voices were so loud they might have been screaming, trapped in the canyon and magnified by the concrete dam at the end. Over the top of a redwood fence I noticed a sea of blonde coifs, all the same colour as the one in the sky. I opened the gate and let myself into the backyard, looking around for Donn.

'Skippy!'

I ignored the voice and kept walking as if I knew where I was going. There was a kidney-shaped swimming pool lit by underwater floodlights, and a pink shape wavered near the bottom, distorted by

the ripples. A group of men gathered around the edge, some in jackets and ties, others in T-shirts and jeans. They cheered as the swimmer surfaced, borne up by an inflated life jacket. Then I realized there was no life jacket. It was her breasts that were inflated. She arched her body, as if hoping to thrust her nipples high enough to catch the beam of the projector, then threw her head back and dove again, the polished lips of her vagina cleaving the water. The men hooted and applauded. I worked my way around the pool, and headed across the patio.

'Skippy?'

There was a burst of flashguns inside the house, turning the glass walls of the rec room blue-white. I spotted a man with huge, frizzy hair next to a billiard table, surrounded by photographers. It had to be Donn.

Now someone grabbed my arm. I felt it caught between two balloons, as if held there by static electricity. I tried to shake them off and glanced over my shoulder.

A stunningly beautiful young woman clutched my arm to her bosom. Her vinyl dress was cut so low it looked like two bald men were trying to fight their way out the front.

'You *are!'* She got a look at my face and dug her long black fingernails into my sweater. 'I knew it.!'

'Hi.'

'I had the biggest crush on you!' She did not want to let go of my arm. 'You were a *lot* cuter than that other dude, the one who played your brother. '

'Tony.'

I could have told her all about Tony Sargent. How he ended up with a habit so big he couldn't get a job pushing a broom at the studio, how he started knocking off liquor stores with his old lady's pantyhose pulled over his head, and how he blew his brains out the night she o.d.'d on the last of his smack. I didn't want to burst her bubble. The show had been out of production since the late seventies but the reruns wouldn't quit. As far as she was concerned I was still Skippy Boomer. She was not alone. At least she hadn't asked for my autograph. Not yet.

'Was that his name?'

'Yeah,' I said. 'A great guy.' I nodded at the rec room, the way I learned to do it in acting class: the gesture first, then the line. 'Is that Donn?'

'Which one was he?'

'The Hedge Man,' I said. 'This is his party, isn't it?'

'Oh yeah.' Her face fell and I thought I caught a glimpse of something fading out behind the layers of make-up, something almost

sad. Then she blinked at me, fluttering her false eyelashes. *'You* know *Donn?'*

'Who doesn't?'

'He's such a trip! I'd work for him any time…'

'Excuse me,' I told her, retrieving my arm. 'I have to say hello.'

I made my way across the patio. The actress in the sky was emoting with mounting fervour, closing her shiny eyelids and tossing her head from side to side as if lost in an opium dream, but no one seemed to be watching. I saw an old theatre projector set up on the buffet table, with several film cans stacked next to it. The reel that was on now appeared to be near its end. I opened the sliding glass door and slipped inside, as the tail of the film clattered on to the takeup spool and the beam of light went white.

Donn was in the middle of an interview. A man with tattooed arms and a baseball cap squinted into a Hi-8 video-cam and stammered through a list of prepared questions, while three ridiculously gorgeous women stood on the sidelines and laughed at each of Donn's jokes. He was the centre of attention, as always.

'What's your next project?' I heard the young man ask.

'Magic Fingers Motel, for Vulcano Video.'

The women whooped and clapped their hands.

'Starring?'

'Lo Ryder,' said Donn without missing a beat, 'Charmin, Kerry O'Quim…How's *that* for a cast? Did I leave anyone out?'

'Rosie Gates!' shouted a beauty in leather hotpants.

Donn snapped his fingers and nodded, rolling his eyes. 'Yeah, Rosie! Wait'll you see the tush on that girl! I met her at the FOXE Awards. Says d.p.'s not enough — she wants to do *triple* penetration! Maybe I'll let Rocco break her in!'

The gorgeous women cracked up.

'Anything else?'

'Lemme see. *The Ram Doubler, Seven Come Eleven, Close Shavers Part Two,* another *Bun Boy's Big Adventure.* and of course *WetWork,* starring the fabulous Celestine Prophet!'

Donn shot a glance outside. Now only an empty square of light showed in the sky.

'What the *fuck?'* He put his hand up, blocking the lens of the camera. 'That's a wrap.'

He brushed past me on his way out to the patio.

'Hey, Skipper,' he said under his breath. 'Stay right where you are. We got business to talk about. '

The gorgeous women started out after him. A fourth, who couldn't have been more than eighteen, had been lingering in the background, watching from the hallway. Now she stepped out of the

shadows and followed tentatively, as though afraid to be seen. She hesitated by the door.

'Pardon me,' she said shyly, 'but can I ask you something?'

'Sure,' I said.

'Are. are you an actor?'

Busted again. 'I used to be.'

'I thought so.' She kept her head down, too nervous to meet my eyes. *'The Boomer Family* was my favourite, when I was little.'

'Thanks,' I said, and almost meant it.

She didn't look like she belonged at the party. She had on a simple summer dress with a high neckline and low-heeled pumps, no jewellery except for a small gold heart on a chain around her neck and hardly any make-up. She didn't need it. She stood there with me and watched the commotion outside.

Donn was flapping his arms and chewing out a guy in ragged cut-offs who was supposed to be running the projector. For a moment I thought he was going to slap the kid across the face, in front of everyone.

'What's your name?' I said.

'Charlene.'

'Hi, Charlene. I'm Rob.' I held out my hand and finally had to touch her wrist before she would look at me.

'I know. Rob Muller.'

That was a surprise. 'Most people think my name's Skippy, even though that was only the character I played.'

She grinned as she took her hand away from mine, embarrassed. Behind her, on the patio, women with matching turned-up noses and collagen lips leaned over the projector, allowing Donn to audition their perfect breasts while they helped him load the next reel.

'What are you doing here?' I asked.

'What?'

'I mean, where are you from?'

'Jonesville,' she said. 'That's in Iowa.'

'Did you come out here to go to school?'

'Not really. I want to be an actor.'

She sounded like she meant it. 'That's a tough gig,' I told her. 'Are you taking classes?'

'I was, back home.'

'Do you have an agent yet?'

'I just got one.'

'Good,' I said. 'What's his name?'

'Jim Western.'

That sounded familiar but I couldn't place it. 'Who's he with?'

'Global Modeling,' she said, 'on La Cienega. Have you heard of

them?'

I had. They represented most of the nude models and dancers in town, and provided the talent for Vulcano, Silver Nitro and VibroFlix, the largest producers of tripleX films and videos in the San Fernando Valley. I didn't know what to say.

'That's how I met Donn,' she explained.

I nodded as if I understood.

'Why don't you try Dimension Films, over at Miramax? They might have something for you.' I racked my brain to remember who else was making low-budget features at the moment, hoping to come up with a legitimate alternative. 'Or TriMark. Or Full Moon. You'll probably have to do horror movies at first, but at least it's a start.'

'I already have one lined up,' she said, without a trace of pretension. 'It might be a series, if it's successful. They're writing the script right now. It's called *The Last Whorehouse on the Left.'*

At that moment the white light outside darkened and the enormous face of Donn's newest contract player, Celestine Prophet, reappeared on the side of the dam above the treetops. Her mouth was open but it was not empty. A hoot went up from the crowd. Two starlets with impossible figures stepped out of their skintight dresses, dove into the deep end and began rolling through the water like dolphins locked in a slippery embrace, as the man with the video camera hurried out to record the action.

'I don't know if I can do it,' Charlene said softly.

'Maybe you shouldn't,' I said.

'Not the way they do.' She meant the starlets outside, those in the pool and the others with their synthetic bodies and sparkling clothes and desperate recklessness. 'Should I change my name, do you think?'

'Why? I like Charlene.'

'Oh, that's not my real name. '

Donn was on his way back in. As I moved aside, she took my hand and clasped it tightly to her side. I felt the youthful firmness of her body moving beneath the thin cotton and realized that she was trembling. She leaned close and whispered in my ear.

'Help me.'

'How?' I said, not moving my lips, as Donn approached the glass doors.

'Not here.'

Donn hadn't met my eyes yet. He was squeezing the buttocks of the one in the hotpants. He twitched his fuzzy moustache, made an O with his mouth and sucked air, moaning in ecstasy.

'Where?' I said to Charlene.

'Later. I'll find you…'

She separated from me and disappeared into the hall.

Donn entertained the troops in the rec room. I stood by while he told a story about a guy who became famous for having his penis cut off twice. I'd heard it before, the day I met him in the lobby of the SAG building, where he held forth with a slightly different version of the same routine. He had recognized me and later, over a drink, offered me a chance to direct. I didn't know who he was then but I found out. I came to his party because he claimed that plenty of regular industry people moonlight in the adult biz under other names, and he threw around numbers that added up to more money than I had made from a whole season on CBS when I was a kid. That was all gone now, of course; there weren't any decent residual clauses back then. I hadn't had many acting jobs since puberty, except for some sci-fi motorcycle flicks and voice-overs on Saturday morning TV. *The Boomer Family* was a curse. My ex had thought she was marrying into show business but what she got was a part-time real estate agent. I couldn't hack it any more, not after the divorce. Maybe Tony had seen the handwriting on the wall, after all.

Donn finished his story in the rec room and introduced the girls to the reporters from *Hustler's Erotic Video Guide* and *Adult Video News.* Then he caught my eye and nodded towards the hall that led to the rest of the house. As we got to the end of the hall I saw an open door and a bright bedroom, where at least two very naked young women were engaged in an act involving a dildo of life-threatening proportions. A videographer with a handheld BetaCam circled around them, offering unnecessary advice as to positions and techniques. Donn led me to the den.

'Strap this on for size,' he said when he closed the door. '"Geoffrey Nightshade".'

'Who?'

'Your *nom de plume.'*

He took a swig from a Heineken and smacked his lips, then set the bottle down and leant back in the leather chair, eyelids at half-mast.

'We send out press releases, hinting that you're a famous European director. They'll beat their meat tryin' to nail you. Is it Karel Reisz? Dario Argento? Michaelangelo Fuckin' Antonioni?'

'Antonioni's in a wheelchair,' I said. 'He had a stroke.'

'That's just it — we don't say! You're this artsy-fartsy schmuck who came here for some real action. You want to do NC-17 but the majors won't let you, blah blah blah. Maybe you're Brian Fuckin' DePalma, who the hell knows? Is it beautiful?'

'Except for one thing,' I said. 'Everybody knows what I look like.'

'Don't be so conceited,' he said.

That brought me up short. Right, I thought. But then I thought, He doesn't know what it's like. The red hair, the freckles… I couldn't even go to the 7-Eleven at two o'clock in the morning without hearing the name *Skippy!* behind my back. Once, in Vegas, the men's room attendant passed a piece of paper under the stall door and asked me to sign it.

'*You* recognized me,' I said.

A faint smile curled his lips as he sat there watching me, his pupils black. What was he looking for? The weakness, I decided. The character flaw that he could exploit. It was what he used on the beauty pageant girls, the high school sweethearts he talked on to their backs in front of the camera, the way he turned their vanity against them until they ended up begging him for a chance to be a star. I wondered if it ever failed.

'Just kidding,' he said. He winked, sat up and reached for a bowl of Doritos, stuffed his face reflexively and washed the chips down with the rest of the beer.

'So what would we do,' I said, 'shoot on a closed set?'

'There's ways. Secret locations, midnight to dawn. '

'What about the crew?'

'Wear a disguise. Pull a hat down over your eyes. Or a cape — that's it, like Dracula! He walks around with the collar up, nobody can see his face. '

He was indomitable. I had to admire the hustle. He was getting me to think about the possibilities. A few more minutes and I would be the one making the suggestions.

'Thanks, anyway,' I told him. I started to get up. 'But it just won't work.'

'How does sixty thousand dollars sound?' he said calmly. 'Plus a buck for every cassette sold.'

'Don't jerk me around, Donn.'

'I'm not! You don't know this business. Six thousand titles last year — a two-billion-dollar gross, just for the rentals! How many did the majors release? A hundred and ninety-seven. And two-thirds of those lost money. That's why Hollywood hates our ass.'

'Sixty thousand,' I said, letting it sink in. 'For one video. Yeah, right.'

He shook his head impatiently. 'Not video — thirty-five millimetre. First class all the way. Say a series of three or four. We move twenty-five, thirty thousand copies each, list price, no sell-throughs. Plus a soft version for cable. You do the arithmetic.'

I couldn't, but I knew it was enough to catch up on the alimony payments, settle with American Express and get the hell out of LA.

'What kind of pictures are we talking about?' I said.

‘Anything you want. *Anything.* I’ve got so many ideas I don’t have time to do ‘em all.’

He shrugged in the direction of a floor-to-ceiling bookcase filled with scripts. I made out some of the titles, written in marking pen on the edges: *Rumper Room, The Cunning Linguist, Ready Whipped, Gag Ball, Rocket to Uranus.*

I must have flinched as I read them, because he waved his hand dismissively.

‘But what I really want to do is a crossover. Semi-legit. You can write it yourself. Whatever turns you on, as long as it’s got the wood and the money shots.’

‘Like?’

‘You name it. My cameraman worked with Orson Welles, my sound mixer’s at Todd-AO, I got an editing bay at FotoKem. we’re talking class, not some home movie with a mattress on the floor!’

He reached behind the chair and handed me several tapes as if dealing out a hand of cards.

‘Latex Dreams, The PsychoAnalist, Harry Butts in the Outback… all directed by Peter Shooter.’ Donn looked at me expectantly.

I drew a blank on the name.

‘You know who he really is, don’t you? Drew Drake! The guy that does those perfume ads on TV? Lots of mood lighting, deep-focus — and the acting! Check out the stairway scene in *Gummy and Pokey*. Faye Way has six minutes of dialogue, no cuts, with Billy Backgate. Then they go right into a mish, a reverse cowgirl, around the world, and they finish with an inverted hole-in-one. Awesome!’

‘Okay, okay. ’

‘And I can get you stars. How about Foxe Bleu? Or Oral Robert? Ever hear of Paul Riser? Take your pick — they *all* work for me. Not to mention Celestine Prophet! Now you know what *drop-dead gorgeous* means. You saw the movie, right?’

‘Not yet. I just got here.’

‘Check it out. She’s got a lot of potential. Vulcano wants her to beat the world gang-bang record, three hundred guys in one day. Shit, she can do that, as long as they keep their fingers out of her — too many scratches. But I want her for something special first. Real class. ’

‘Why not get Drew Drake?’

‘He’s busy shooting that LaToya Jackson movie for Showtime. *Diana Ross Raw* or whatever the hell it’s called.’

‘Why me?’

‘I’m a fan.’ He shrugged, as if stating the obvious. ‘So sue me.’

‘You don’t even know if I can direct.’

‘You did three episodes of *Blossom,* two *Space Precincts* and one *Jaleel White Show,* before he flipped out.’

He had done his homework.

'I was only first a.d. on those,' I reminded him.

'But you know the drill. Three two-day shoots. Think you can handle a total of six fucking days?' He got up, went to his desk and opened a chequebook ledger. 'I'll give you an advance. How much to seal the deal?'

'I don't know, Donn. '

'Say five large?' He scrawled his name on a cheque and tore it out of the book. 'Think about it and call me. Just don't wait too long. I'm back in Australia next week for *Bun Boy Goes Down Under.'*

In the hall ahead of me, a bimbo came out of the bathroom. She looked vaguely familiar. Her hair was teased and sprayed into a blonde waterfall like the other girls. When she grabbed my hand I did a double-take.

'Charlene?' I said.

She wiped her nose with a tissue and pulled me into the bathroom. Her eyes were moist, as if she had been crying.

'Sorry,' she said, closing and locking the door, 'but I don't know who else to ask.'

'That's all right. What—?'

'I've only been in the business for a month. '

She began to cry. First her wide, sky-blue eyes focused intently on my face, as if watching every shift in expression, every muscle tic, before deciding whether to go on. Apparently enough of what I was feeling showed, because she slumped against the door and lowered her face, wiping her nose again. When she raised her head the whites of her eyes were red and tears spilled out and ran down to her perfect nostrils and the cracked red skin there. She must have done a lot of crying lately. The tears dripped off the narrow point of her chin — too narrow, I noticed for the first time. She had already been to a plastic surgeon. Next would come the incisions under her small, flawless breasts, which might mean surgically repositioning the nipples, depending on the size of the implants.

'You can still get out,' I said. 'It's not too late.'

'But I signed a contract.'

'Contracts can be broken. I'll find you a lawyer. '

'You don't understand — I need the money. What am I going to do, go back to Jonesville and get a job at the phone company? Do you know what that pays? No way!'

She rubbed her nose, trying to compose herself.

'I really don't mind the work,' she went on. 'I never had an orgasm before my first d.p., and I've done anal plenty of times, with my boyfriend. It's not so bad if you're lubed.'

'How many pictures have you made?' I heard myself ask.

'Two, counting the one that isn't out yet.'

'What's the name of the first one?'

'WetWork,' she said. 'Did you see it? Donn wants me to do a series next, if he can find the right actor-director.'

'What do you mean?'

'A real actor, who can direct his own scenes…'

So that was what the sixty grand was for. He wanted to buy a face the public had seen before but never in porn. It was another stunt to generate publicity. I wondered how much Donn would offer George Clooney or Brad Pitt, if there was a chance he could get them.

'Excuse me.'

She blocked my way, holding the doorknob behind her back.

'I don't mind the name, either. Celestine's pretty, don't you think? It's just that Donn won't let me use on the set, and I need something. '

'I have to go.'

'Please?' She pressed against me and guided my hand up under her dress, so that I could feel the latex thong bikini she was already wearing, in preparation for her introduction to the press. 'I can't make it straight. Do you have just a *little* coke? I'll be nice, you'll see…'

From the hall I heard Donn searching for his new starlet. I waited for him to pass, then lifted her off her feet. She was light as a plastic doll. I swung her around, set her down and opened the door.

As I ducked through the crowd in the rec room Donn was making excuses to buy a little more time. Then he went back into the hall. I heard him raise his voice and another voice sobbing. A minute later he returned and announced that Celestine Prophet was almost ready to make her entrance. Meanwhile, he reminded everybody, *WetWork* was running continuously outside. On the way down to the car I felt his cheque in my shirt pocket. It seemed to be pounding against my chest. I wondered whether he had made it out to Geoffrey Nightshade or Skippy Boomer. Either way I wouldn't be able to cash it, but I wasn't ready to look yet. In the sky a movie was ending or beginning, I couldn't tell which. I decided it didn't matter. The last reel would be just like the first.

* * *

Dennis Etchison is the recipient of both the World Fantasy and British Fantasy Awards for his short stories, and he is recognized as a writer who has consistently expanded the boundaries of the horror genre. His incisive short fiction has appeared in various publications, and is collected in *The*

Dark Country, Red Dreams and *The Blood Kiss.* Aside from the movie novelizations *The Fog, Halloween II* and *III* and *Videodrome,* his novels include *Darkside* (recently reissued as a limited edition hardcover with the author's preferred text restored), *Shadowman, California Gothic* and *Double Edge.* He has also edited the landmark anthologies *Cutting Edge, MetaHorror* and *Masters of Darkness.* About 'The Last Reel', Etchison says: 'This is the opening chapter of *Blue Screen,* a novel about reality and illusion in Hollywood. The title has a double meaning. It refers to a kind of special effects or process shot used in film-making, and to "blue" (X-rated) movies. It also stands alone as a short story complete in itself.'

Everybody Needs Somebody to Love
MARK TIMLIN

People say, that when you lose someone close, it gets better as time goes by.

People are wrong.

If anything, it gets worse.

At first, when you think about them, they might just be down the shops. Or maybe away on holiday, and due back in a week or two. Or at worst, they've gone to the other side of the world to live. But even if they've gone to the other side of the world, there's still a chance that they'll come back for a visit, and you'll bump into them one day in Oxford Street, and go for a cup of coffee or a drink, and catch up on their news.

Not if they're dead you won't.

And sometimes that truth hits you like a length of 2x4, and you suddenly realize with a gut-wrenching force that you're never going to see them again.

Ever.

That's what happened to me five years ago. Five Years. Just like the old David Bowie song on *Ziggy Stardust*. I had that album on 8-track cartridge. Remember them?

On 8-track cartridge in a special edition Ford Capri 1600 in Dayglo orange with all the chrome sprayed black, a black spoiler, and some kind of trick Venetian blind doodad on the back window. It was impossible to see what was behind you, but it looked cool.

That was before I met Louise. In fact I can never remember exactly when we did meet. I can't quite pin it down, though I think about it often.

It must have been '73. Spring. And she died in '89. So we were together for sixteen years. On and off.

See, we were children of the permissive society. No responsibility. No obligation. No commitment. If you weren't off screwing the world, you weren't living.

And Christ knows, Louise and I tried.

We were both working in the music business then. Rock and Roll. Liberation. Sex, drugs, violence, booze, freedom. A heady mix. We had it all, and we fucked it up.

I'd just got a job in the record company that Louise worked for. She was the public relations girl. We called them girls then. I went out to record shops, and tried to convince them to stock our product. I took the managers out for boozy lunches, did window displays, that

sort of thing. And when a band was in town, I'd go to gigs and put up displays there as well. And I supplied the drugs. Women too. You could've described me as a low-life ponce. But we never thought about it like that then. Not in those days.

That was why I was given the flashy car. We reckoned that a Dayglo orange Ford Capri 1600 was the cutting edge. Then.

I didn't meet Louise until I'd been in the job for a couple of weeks, but I'd heard all about her. She was famous. Notorious even.

Then on my third Monday morning at our weekly sales and publicity meeting, I did.

She'd broken her ankle six weeks previously, walking down the little street that connects Oxford Street and Soho Square where our offfices were located. She'd been reading *Melody Maker* as she went, not looking where she was going as usual, and tripped over the kerb. Silly cow. A couple of guys who were working on one of the buildings carried her back to the office where they called an ambulance. So my first sight of her was as she blew into the conference room, red hair permed and flowing, full-on make-up job, with loads of lipstick and eye liner, wearing a halter top made out of patches of ten kinds of material that she'd got from *Mr Freedom,* a long black skirt with buttons up the front, unbuttoned almost to her crotch, one gold, platform soled boot with a six inch heel, and one built-up plaster on the other leg. She looked great and she knew it.

'Who the hell is *that?'* I said to my boss.

'That's Louise Spenser,' he replied. 'You wanna watch her.'

And I did. Couldn't keep my eyes off her, to be honest. And she knew it.

After the meeting we all went to the boozer. The Nellie Dean in Dean Street. I stood next to her at the bar and hummed 'Jake The Peg'. It's a Rolf Harris song about a bloke with an extra leg. Funny what you remember.

She gave me a cold stare, and sat with two members of our most popular band of the time.

A few months later she told me that she thought I was one of the most objectionable men she'd ever met.

We were in bed together when she told me that, which just goes to show that first impressions can be misleading.

She was always accident-prone. Whilst we were together she broke her leg once, her arm twice, and I lost count of the number of times she fell over in the street.

Even the way she died was by accident, although it took over three years for it to happen.

But we'll get to that later.

For some reason the pair of us saw quite a lot of each other that spring, and at first I knew she wasn't very happy about it.

We had to go to the same places, you see. I got promoted to being a record plugger along with all my other jobs, and we'd bump into each other at Radio 1, Thames TV and London Weekend, as well as at concerts and in the office.

I followed her around like a dog. She was three years younger than me. Only twenty when we met. But believe me, she was a world of experience wiser.

It seemed to me that she loved only two things. Music and alcohol. Not necessarily in that order. Of course with the music, came the guys in the bands, and with the booze came certain other substances. All of them illegal. But what did we care? Like her, ever since I'd first come across them, I'd taken to them like a duck to a duck pond.

I remember her telling me once that she liked anything that came between her and reality, and I said amen to that.

I'd led a pretty sheltered life until I got into the music business. Married at twenty to a sweet girl who didn't understand me, and who could blame her? I didn't understand myself. Still don't. I knew that inside me was something wild. Something I didn't want to acknowledge because it frightened me. I knew that deep down I wasn't functioning right. So I asked the first woman who I knew would say yes to marry me. And she did.

I figured that if I took on that sort of responsibility I'd settle down.

How wrong I was. When I got married I was working for an insurance company, in a job that with my qualifications I could do on my head. I did, and hated it.

When I'd been at school I'd worked in a record shop as a Saturday boy, and loved it. One evening on the way home from work I saw an advertisement in the *Evening Standard* for a record shop manager. On impulse I answered the ad, got an interview, lied through my teeth, and got the job.

I was good at it too.

Then one day, a bloke who sold records off the back of a truck for a tiny company that happened to have one of the biggest bands in the world on the label was having a cup of tea in the shop, when his van got towed away by the law.

This individual was always broke and didn't have the price of the parking ticket and tow-away fee on him, and got a bit panicky about what they would say back at his office.

I lent him the cash out of the till on the promise that if a job came up with the company I'd get first refusal.

He paid back the cash next time he called, thanked me for saving his life, and a few weeks later, gave me a bell and told me that another of the salesmen had left and I had an interview for his job the next morning.

I got it too, and quit the shop that Friday.

I thought I was the business. A white Escort van full of hot product, a desk in a room overlooking Old Compton Street, and rock stars coming and going at all hours. Bliss.

Of course I soon fell into bad habits with the bad company I was keeping. I'd only ever smoked a few joints before, and maybe had the occasional half of bitter. I told you I was innocent, and besides, my wife didn't drink.

But this place was Cocaine Central. Smack City. Marijuana Junction. Heaven, in other words. The first joint of the day was rolled with the coffee at ten, and the pubs opened at eleven. Of course not a lot of records were sold, but with this particular band pumping out the units worldwide, it hardly seemed to matter.

After a few months, the guys who owned the label and the distribution company got a bit pissed off, and closed it down. All the other salesmen got fired, but I was kept on. General dogsbody for the record company was my game, and I loved that too.

Then I met a woman. Like no other woman I'd met before, or have since. She was pure poison wrapped in satin and lace, with shoes by Zapata, who wafted a trail of patchouli oil behind her that drove men mad.

Me included.

She was in the process of getting divorced from the bass player in an American band who were gradually winding down from being huge. She'd lived in California for a couple of years, then came back to London when her marriage broke down, got a job with the company, a flat off the King's Road, and started hunting for prey.

She went through the guys in the office like a tornado, until eventually she got to me.

I fell like the proverbial ton of bricks, and she screwed, blued and tattooed me until I could hardly walk.

I knew I was being a mug, but I couldn't leave her alone, and she knew it.

So did my wife.

In the end, after one of the shortest marriages in either of our families, we separated, and she divorced me.

Adultery.

As soon as the divorce proceedings began, the woman I was crazy about dumped me for a nineteen-year-old boy studying at Oxford.

For the first time in my life I was left for a younger man, and it

hurt.

I left the firm shortly afterwards, and drifted round the fringes of the music business for a couple of years, until I got the job where I met Louise.

I had a load of girlfriends in the meantime, but no one permanent, and put my other bad habits on the back burner through lack of funds.

Then Louise turned up the heat.

See, I didn't like the taste of booze much, though I'd had my share. Bitter reminded me of cold coffee, and Scotch made me puke.

Louise had the answer. She introduced me to Strawberry Hock, White Russians, Margaritas, and Harvey Wallbangers, and I was a dead gone kid.

And I found I had quite a capacity for liquor. Hard liquor, and this improbable redhead who kept flashing her knickers at me.

We got it together for the first time in the back of the Capri in an underground car park somewhere off the Euston Road. God knows why we picked that particular location. Romantic it wasn't. Horny, it most definitely was.

I won't go into details. Just believe me.

After that we were an item. Christ knows why. She could have had her pick of hundreds of blokes, but she chose me.

Of course we weren't faithful to each other. That would never have done. But she moved into my flat, and we set up housekeeping together. She was a hell of a cook too. Real domestic when she wanted to be, and she got a cat.

We lived together for about eight years before things went seriously up the creek. During that time I asked her to marry me, and she refused, and just before we split up for the first time, she asked me to marry her, and I refused.

Then I met someone else and fucked off. I left Louise the flat where she continued to live with her cat. Percy was his name. A Burmese cross, and destined to live longer than his mistress. Not much, but a bit.

But somehow we couldn't seem to manage without each other, Louise and me. Can't live with, can't live without. Know that one?

I think that in the first year we were apart, we talked more than in the last year we were together. And my new girlfriend wasn't happy about it.

Too damn bad, I thought. By then I was on the road, tour-managing bands all round the world. Louise got me work in the management office where she was doing PR, after the record company

we'd both worked for went belly-up, and naturally that threw us together even more.

So, in the end, I left the woman I'd left Louise for, and moved back in. It was great too, for a while. I was on tour most of the time, screwing the world, getting fucked up with drugs and booze every night, and thoroughly enjoying myself.

Then I met someone else. I needed to right then. I was a mess. Semi-alcoholic. Semi-addicted to uppers and downers, and as a lot of my friends told me, on a one-way roller-coaster ride to Hell.

Mind you, it felt all right to me. But I'm always the last to know.

So when Ms Straight came along, determined to save me from myself, I clung on to her like the last survivor of a shipwreck clinging on to a lifebelt.

By then I was beginning to realize that if I didn't get cleaned up I was in serious trouble. I was taking more than the fatal dose of Valium every day, and getting through a bottle of spirits or more between noon and bedtime.

Ms Straight worked in publishing, had a nice, and I mean nice, bijou house in Clapham, and needed a project. *Moi.*

So I packed my bags and left Louise again. She cried and so did I.

I lasted a couple of years with Ms Straight, cleaned up my act and got a job in publishing too. I made a few good contacts through her, had a fair degree in English, loved reading, and somehow knew what looked right on the page. It wasn't the biggest or most prestigious publishing house in London, but it suited me. I still had the job until. Well, like I said before, we'll come to that.

Of course I kept in touch with Louise. I knew by then that I had an addictive personality, and I was addicted to her. We'd been together for years, and had become, to our mutual surprise, good friends. No more sex. That had gone out of the window long before. No. Friends. Friends with mutual interests, private jokes, and memories that no one else shared.

Of course Ms Straight hated it. She thought that when I was with Louise I was off the straight and narrow. And she was right. But not as badly as before. Never as bad as that, ever again.

Then we split up too, and I was left with my clothes, some books, some records, and a Ford Sierra. Not a lot to show for a life, but we all have different goals.

Louise took me back, of course. She'd got a new place to live by then. She was on her own, apart from Percy, and I moved into the spare room.

It was that summer that Louise had the accident that in time was going to kill her. And if I'd been around it would probably never have

happened.

She was doing freelance PR by then. Still in the music business, but video and travel too.

One of her clients was a travel agent who, by way of a bonus, offered her a week in Spain for two. It was at short notice, and I couldn't go. I was working a deadline on a book edit, with a particularly obnoxious and pernickity author, and there was no way I could get time off.

None of her other friends could make it either. It was literally go the next morning or not at all. So she went. On her own.

Hey, this was the eighties. What could happen?

Shit happened. Like it often does.

She had a great time. Fell in with the hotel owner and his family, and got real friendly.

Then on the last morning of her stay, with her bags packed, and whilst she was waiting for the coach to pick her up for the trip to the airport, she went for one last stroll along the beach she'd come to love.

And Nemesis, in the shape of a big, black dog came loping along the beach towards her.

At first she thought he was just being playful, and as an animal lover, she joined in. Maybe he was, but he got too excited and bit her. Twice. Once on the face and once on the foot.

Louise was terrified and ran into the water to escape. The dog didn't follow her. He ran up and down on the seashore for a minute, then split. Louise came out of the water, went back to the hotel, dried herself off, changed, put plasters on her bites and came home.

No anti-tetanus. No antibiotics. Nothing.

She was okay for a couple of weeks, then started to go strange. Now you've got to remember that Louise was always strange. Eccentric. And the older she got, the more eccentric she became. I didn't mind. I'm eccentric myself, and I was used to her.

Then one night, after a particularly early start, I came home to find her lying nude on her bed. She hadn't touched the breakfast dishes, and Percy was screaming to be fed.

I moaned like hell as I fed him, and she came into the kitchen, still naked, and collapsed.

I wasn't very sympathetic. After a hard day at the office, all I was ready for was to crash out in front of the TV with an Indian take-away.

'Are you pissed?' I said unkindly after I'd picked her up and put her in a chair.

'No.'

'What then? Why aren't you dressed?'

She suddenly looked scared. ‘Don’t know. I’m fine.’

‘No you’re not.’

‘I am.’

And suddenly, with the sure and certain knowledge obtained from all the years I’d known her, I realized that something was seriously wrong.

‘Louise,’ I said. ‘What day is it?’

It was a Thursday. A day of infamy.

‘Monday,’ she said.

‘And you haven’t been on the booze, or anything else?’

‘No. I told you.’

‘Lou,’ I said. ‘Get some clothes on. I’m going to take you to the hospital.’

‘No,’ she screamed, and ran and locked herself in her bedroom. This wasn’t the Louise I knew, so when she refused to answer my knocks, I called her doctor. I apologized, told him what had happened, and that she wouldn’t unlock her door.

He wasn’t a bad bloke, and came straight round. Louise had always been fond of him, and after a few minutes’ conversation through the locked door, she opened it. By then she’d pulled on a dress, and put on some lipstick. But most of it was on her chin, and the dress was on back to front. When I saw that, I knew that something bad, something well beyond my ken, was happening.

And I was right.

The doctor called an ambulance, then left. That was all he could do.

I went to the hospital with Louise. The paramedic asked her for her name, address and date of birth. She didn’t have a clue. She was getting worse. I gave him the information, and stayed at the hospital all night. No one could or would tell me what was wrong. Eventually I cornered a consultant in one of the corridors, and he told me. Meningitis. Another day and she would have been dead.

She was off her head for more than a week. She didn’t know me. She didn’t know her family. She didn’t know her friends. Then, just as the fever broke, complications set in.

The meningitis had weakened a valve in her heart, and she needed immediate surgery. They operated right away, and put in a new valve.

I went to visit the same night and I could hear her screaming as I got out of the lift. I didn’t know how I knew that it was her, but I did. I’d never heard a sound like it before or since. Primeval. Animal. My blood temperature fell like a stone.

I was sure she was going to die that night. But she was made of

sterner stuff. I'd always known that Louise was tough, but I had no conception exactly how tough that was.

She pulled through, and left hospital a month later. I was down as next-of-kin and the consultant called me into his office the day she was discharged.

'Does she smoke?' he asked.

I nodded.

'Not any more. Does she drink?'

I nodded again.

'Keep it moderate.'

There was about as much chance of that as flying down to Rio without a plane, but I didn't say so.

Louise had to keep going back to the hospital as an outpatient. Three times a week to have her blood checked, and she had so many needle holes in her arms that she looked like a junkie.

They hurt her a lot there. It wasn't their fault, but each time she came back I could see the pain in her eyes like a shadow on the sun.

Then the doctors decided she needed a heart transplant. And all because the Spanish authorities pumped untreated sewage into the sea, and that damned dog had chewed on her.

So the waiting began for a suitable donor. A wait that was going to take three long years, and every day her condition deteriorated.

And looking back, the worst thing is that when you're with someone who is seriously ill, terminally ill in fact, you get used to it. Get to take it for granted, and in the end you treat it as normal.

At least until the worst happens.

And the worst happened just after Easter in 1991. Louise was bad. And then the call came that a suitable donor heart had turned up. It belonged to a twenty-one-year-old man who had died in a car crash.

Of course I wasn't there when she got bleeped. I was working, and got the message later. After the operation had been done in fact. I was in London looking after the apartment and Percy, and flat out against a deadline again.

The operation took place on a Tuesday evening, and when I called the hospital that night, they told me everything was fine. I phoned again on Wednesday, and the prognosis was excellent. She phoned me herself on Thursday morning and sounded great. I know I should have visited her, but I was busy. You see, she was in Bedfordshire, and I wasn't.

If everyone hadn't been telling me how successful the op had been, I'd have gone up. But they kept saying that she was doing well, so I didn't arrange to visit until Sunday morning.

By then I'd sold my car, and another friend of Lou's was driving up, and had offered me a lift.

Listen. I've thought about it a million times since. I should have gone before, but I never thought that anything really bad was going to happen.

She was Louise, see. And Louise always survived.

Wrong.

I was boiling an egg for breakfast and waiting for the guy to arrive that Sunday morning when the call from the hospital came.

She was starting to reject they said, and I should prepare for the worst. I turned off the gas under the saucepan as soon as I put down the receiver, and the egg was still there when I left the place finally, weeks later. It was kind of like a reminder of what I'd done. Or hadn't done, as the case may be.

But the worst was still to come.

When the guy with the car arrived I told him what was happening, and we drove up in silence.

He didn't come into the hospital with me. Just sat in the car outside and I went in alone.

She was bad. Dying. I took one look at her, and I knew. Then to my eternal shame, I left.

But eternity is a long time, and I was going to learn that the worst way.

I went back to her friend in the car and we went. We stopped at the first boozer that was open and I had several large ones.

She died at half past nine that night, and I wasn't with her. Just call me bastard. I do it all the time.

I should have gone to see her before. I should have stayed with her when she was dying. But I didn't have the bottle.

So I never had a proper, last conversation with her. And when I think of all the times we'd talked in the past, that's one of the things I regret most. That we didn't talk after the operation. And after she died, I'd have given my right arm to talk to her for just a few minutes.

Stick around.

That was five years ago, and like I say, it gets worse.

The day she died, part of me died too, and try as I might, I can't resurrect that part, and as the fifth anniversary of her death got closer, more and more I found myself at three or four in the morning, sitting dead drunk in my living room, crying my eyes out, playing her favourite records and contemplating doing my wrists with a razor blade.

I'd moved, of course. I could have stayed at Louise's place, but couldn't handle it. So I'd found a place of my own. I was alone by then. Even poor old Percy had died. He'd lasted a year or two, but no cat can live for ever, and in the end the vet said that it would be

kinder to have him put down. I cried then too. Like I say, I've cried a lot over those five years, but who are the tears for? Me or Louise?

Shit, but I hated being on my own. And I'd been involved in some disastrous relationships since she died.

Relationships? That's not exactly the word I'd use to describe them. More like disgusting little detours into my worst nightmares. But after a while, any comfort seemed better than none, even if, as certainly as night follows day, they ended in disaster.

And then, shortly after the fifth anniversary of Louise's death, I met Julia.

Jules, she called herself. Which was fair enough. She could've called herself exactly what she wanted as far as I was concerned.

I met Jules at a publishing party. I was pissed as usual. I usually was in those days.

She was standing at the drinks table and I wandered over to get a refill.

'Hello,' she said.

"Lo,' I said back. She was blonde, with long, thick hair, a little black dress and high heels. She looked all right. Better than all right as a matter of fact. But the state I was in, Alsatians looked attractive.

'My name's Jules,' she said, and stuck out her mitten.

I had a cigarette in one hand, and a glass of appalling red wine in the other, so none to spare. 'Paul,' I replied, and spilled my drink down her front.

'Clumsy,' she said, but didn't appear to take umbrage. That was certainly a point in her favour.

'Sorry,' I said. 'I'm pissed.'

'So I noticed.'

'I'll pay to have your dress cleaned.'

'Don't worry about it. It'll go through the wash.'

'Good attitude. Fancy a drink?'

'I've got one.'

'No. Not here. Somewhere else.'

'Are you trying to pick me up?'

'Not if you don't want me to.'

'I might be here with someone.'

Same old same-old. 'Well if you are,' I said. 'Just say so.'

'Well I'm not.'

'Right. That's got that sorted. Do you want a drink then?'

'Are you always so aggressive?'

'Yes. No. Dunno.'

'Where would we go?'

'There's a club I know around the corner. Gerry's. It's all right.'

‘All right then.’

So that was that. On the way to the club and over a few drinks, until we got slung out at closing time which was about 2 a.m., I told her what I did, and she told me that she worked for an agency which handled film and TV writers. So we were brother and sister under the media skin. What larks!

When we finally left the place, I was totally gone, and she wasn’t far behind. We stood together in Dean Street and a decision that was to shape the rest of our lives was made.

‘Wanna come back to my place?’ I mumbled.

‘Where’s that?’

‘Stockwell.’ She’d already intimated that she lived somewhere west of Shepherd’s Bush.

She hesitated. She knew what it meant if she came. And so did I.

A cab turned out of Old Compton Street, heading our way, with its amber ‘For Hire’ light burning.

‘Okay,’ she said, and the die was cast.

I hailed the taxi, gave him my address and we both tumbled in.

We got back to my place, went in, I made coffee in a sort of embarrassed silence, we drank it, and went to bed.

Now normally, these sort of late, one-night-stands with strangers end up in total grief. But this one was different. In bed we fitted together well, and we both enjoyed it.

The last thing I remember before falling asleep was Jules kissing me and saying, ‘That was great. I haven’t had so much fun in years.’

And truth to tell, nor had I.

When I woke up it was light. The rising sun slanted through the gaps in the curtains and lay brightly on the duvet. Jules was fast asleep next to me, curled up like a kitten, and Louise was standing at the foot of the bed.

I mean she was there. Really there. Three dimensional and displacing the air. You see, however much you love someone, and however well you know them, when they’ve gone, sometimes it’s hard to remember what they looked like.

Thousands of times I’ve tried to place her in my new flat, but I only have four images of her that remain with me always. And none of them are particularly pleasant.

The first two are from the place we shared, and both are after she got sick.

The first memory comes from a morning. She was standing, brushing her hair in the mirror, silhouetted against the sun shining through one window. Her hair, that she’d once been so proud of, was coming out in clumps, and I realized how close to death she was.

The second is from the evening. Late evening in the summer before she died. Once again the sun caught her. This time as we were sitting together and watching TV. And for a brief instant I saw her as she would be if she lived to be very old. But by then, her body *was* old, and within a few months it would close down completely.

The third memory is how she was that Sunday morning when I went to see her for the last time in hospital. Her skin was tight over her skull, there was a white crust around her mouth, and when she saw me, and reached out to touch me, her fingers were like claws.

And finally. The last memory is from when I went back the next day. When I plucked up courage to go. I remember how she was lying in her coffin. She should have looked peaceful then. The battle over. But she didn't. She looked totally pissed off that she was dead. And I could only bring myself to touch her face for a moment. It was cold, and hard like wax. And I hated it. And hated myself for feeling like that, and not being there when she died.

As I left the room where she was lying, the old man who dealt with the bodies gave me the ring she was wearing when she died. It was a sapphire and diamonds set in platinum. I went home and put it on a chain around my neck so I wouldn't forget her.

I still have it.

'Hello Paul,' she said from where she was standing. 'Long time.'

'Louise,' I said, confused. 'Is that you?'

"Course it is.'

'But you're…'

'Dead, is the word,' she said, and came around and sat on the bed next to me.

I looked at Jules lying there, beside me, and wondered why, of all the hundreds and hundreds of mornings I'd woken up alone since Louise died, she'd decided to pop round on this one.

I said as much. I wasn't frightened or anything. Just curious.

'Because of her,' replied Louise, poking Jules. 'You two are going to make a go of it.' And she poked her again. Harder.

Jules didn't wake, just sighed in her sleep and rolled over.

'She won't wake up,' said Louise. 'You did a good job on her last night.'

'I don't understand,' I said. 'Am I imagining this?' What else could I say under the circumstances?

'Feel me,' she said, and held out her hand. The hand I'd touched a million times before.

I took her hand in mine. It felt like solid flesh. But cool. Not cold. Not warm. Cool.

'So where have you been?' I asked.

‘I don’t know. Somewhere.’

‘Why haven’t you come back before?’

‘It’s difficult.’

‘Are there other people there?’

‘Yes. But we never meet.’

‘So you’re alone.’

‘Not entirely. Percy’s with me. Look.’

She pointed towards the door, and there, with a look on his face as supercilious as the one he’d worn when he’d been alive, was her cat.

‘He just turned up one day,’ she said.

‘So what is this place?’

‘It’s like a beach. Hard sand. Red. And sometimes I can hear the sea, but I can never find it. It never gets dark, but the sun never shines. You never sleep or get hungry, or go to the loo. You don’t sweat or get dirty. You salivate a little. Just enough to talk, and your eyes are wet, but you never cry. Sometimes I find footprints, but I’ve never seen another soul except Percy.

‘I had to have him put down,’ I explained. ‘It was a kindness.’

‘I know. I’m not cross. I like his company.’

‘And you can see what’s going on here?’

‘I can see what’s going on everywhere.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Look up at the stars, Paul. And you’ll know what I mean.’

‘You can see what happens on other worlds?’

‘Sssh, Paul. I shouldn’t be telling you all this. I shouldn’t be here at all.’

‘Who told you that? Who told you everything?’

‘No one. I just knew. When I got there I just knew the rules. The same as I knew what would happen if I disobeyed them.’

‘And what would happen?’

‘Well, if I get found out. Poof!’ she said. ‘I’ll *go* to another place.’

‘What kind of place?’

‘I don’t want to think about it. There, there be dragons.’

‘And you just look, and you can see what’s going on here?’ I was beginning to repeat myself.

‘I’ve never missed an episode of *EastEnders.’* That had always been her favourite programme.

‘And now you’ve decided to pay me a visit. Just like that.’

She got my drift. ‘Don’t worry,’ she said. ‘I’m not going to suddenly turn into a flesh-eating zombie like in the films. And Percy won’t change into the rabid cat from Hell with six-inch fangs. It doesn’t work like that. I just know that now you’ve met *her,’* she looked disgustedly at Jules’ still form, ‘you’re going to forget all about

me, and I'll just fade away.'

'No,' I said. 'You're wrong. I'd never forget about you in a million years. She's nothing to me. An easy lay. It's you I love, and always will.'

Louise smiled, got up from the bed and stood beside me. 'We'll see,' she said, bent down, picked up Percy, who put his paws on her shoulder like he always did, and she walked out of the room.

I lay in bed for a minute at least before I followed her. The flat was empty, and I knew it. But even so, I looked in every cupboard and behind every chair.

I went back to bed, and although I didn't think I would, I fell asleep again, and when Jules gave me a shake at eight-thirty, I was sure I'd dreamt it all.

'I had a hell of a dream,' I said.

'Me too. I dreamt that you were going to fuck me again.'

So I did.

Dream or not, Louise had been right. Jules and I did make a go of it.

We saw each other constantly that summer, although I must confess I tried to spend as much time as possible at her place, a *pied-à-terre* down the Goldhawk Road. It wasn't bad. Just twenty minutes' drive away, or a few stops on the Victoria line, then change, and a few more stops heading west.

But Louise didn't come back to visit, and eventually I forgot all about it.

Then, one evening that September, I came in from work to get changed for a publisher's dinner, and she was sitting at the kitchen table holding Percy on her lap. He was looking longingly at the fridge, and it struck me that whatever Louise had said, some dead creatures still remembered about being hungry.

'Hello,' she said when I walked in. 'Fancy a cup of tea?'

It was the same thing she'd said to me myriad times before. And I answered like I'd always answered. 'Sure,' I said. 'Put the kettle on.'

She dropped the cat on to the floor and did just that. 'I told you that you two would get on, didn't I?'

I nodded and lit a cigarette.

She made the tea. Just one cup, and said, 'Party tonight?'

'You obviously know,' I replied. 'Been using your crystal ball again?'

'That's right. Taking Jules?'

I nodded.

'You could always take me.'

'Can anyone else see you?' I hadn't asked that question before.

She shook her head.

'It'd be a bit weird then, wouldn't it? Me sitting next to an empty chair having a conversation with an untouched plate of chicken Kiev.'

'I suppose you're right. But I might come anyway. The Savoy, isn't it?'

'Is there anything you don't know?'

'No.'

'Then why this visit? Not that you're not welcome.'

'You're forgetting me. I can tell. I'm fading away.'

'Does that happen?'

'Only to people that no one cares about.'

'But I do care.'

'Not as much. Not since Jules came along.'

Of course it *was* true.

'Sorry,' I said.

'Don't mention it. Some people only last a few weeks.'

'How do you know that, if you've never seen anyone else?'

'I don't know,' she replied. 'I just do.'

'So what can we do about it?'

'Lots of things,' said Louise. 'But I'd better let you get changed. You don't want to keep Jules waiting.' And she hauled Percy up, and walked out of the kitchen, closing the door behind her. I only waited a split second before I followed, but when I searched, the flat was empty again.

After that, things started getting *really* weird. Louise and Percy were hanging out a lot at my flat, and I wouldn't let Jules anywhere near the place. Not that Louise didn't make the odd appearance at Jules' place. She did. And often I'd know she'd been there when we weren't. Things were moved or vanished, and Jules started talking poltergeists. Hey, I knew better. And then she started showing up at work, and in pubs, bars and restaurants. I was losing weight and smoking too much, and people started commenting on it.

It got so that I dreaded spotting a redhead anywhere. A redhead in a black sweater, black short skirt, black tights, and scuffed black shoes. A redhead who didn't look a minute older than the day I met her all those years ago.

Then, just before Christmas, I made the biggest mistake of my life. On the twenty-first of December I asked Jules to marry me.

And on the same day, she made the biggest mistake of *her* life.

She accepted.

She was going up north for Christmas to visit her family who had moved there.

She wanted me to go with her, but I had family commitments of

my own. And besides, I wanted her to break the happy news to her folks whilst I was a couple of hundred miles away. I spent Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and Boxing Day in the bosom of my family. I told them the glad tidings just before I left, and split to leave them to mull it over in their own time.

I got back to my flat at lunchtime on the 27th, and Louise was waiting for me.

Talk about 'Hell hath no fury'.

She was well pissed off, and even old Percy spat at me. And I'd fed the little bugger for years.

'I knew it,' she screamed. 'I knew you'd do something stupid.'

'Hey, listen,' I said back. 'You're dead. I don't even know if you're a figment of my imagination. So don't get all aerated with me.'

'Try this for a figment,' she said, and cleaned my clock with a right hander. It hurt too. 'If you marry that bitch, I'll be gone. I know it. She'll want babies and shit like that, and you'll forget me, and I'll be gone.'

'I told you, Louise,' I said as calmly as possible under the circumstances, holding a cold flannel to my throbbing nose, I'll never forget you.'

'And you want me to stay?'

What could I say, after all we'd been through? It was time to shit or get off the pot. Cast the die, and to hell with the consequences.

'Yes,' I said. And with that single word I invoked the chaos theory. A butterfly spread its wings in Venezuela, and it rained in Somaliland.

Louise calmed down then, and Percy rubbed his fat, furry self against my leg. She even cooked me dinner. A most acceptable lamb chop, mashed potatoes and peas.

Later on, when I was smashed on a bottle of port that one of my authors had sent me for Christmas, I broached the subject of sex.

We were watching the late-night movie. A stalk, strip and slash exploiter from the late seventies.

'Do you still fancy it?' I asked.

'No,' she replied. 'That's all over. Just as well really.'

I had to agree, but didn't vocalize the thought. Necrophilia had never been a fantasy of mine.

Louise stayed until the end of the film, then she blew me a kiss, collected Percy and left.

She stopped in the doorway as she was going, and asked, 'Did you really mean what you said?'

'What?' I'd said an awful lot that night.

'About me staying.'

'Of course.'

She smiled a brilliant smile. ‘Good,’ she said. ‘See you around.’

But after she went, I remembered the story about the man who wished for something, and got exactly what he’d wished for.

Jules came back for New Year, we went out and celebrated, and surprise, surprise, Louise didn’t show.

I was amazed. At the very least I’d expected her to pop in and wish me the compliments of the season.

In fact I didn’t see her for months. And as the wedding plans advanced, Jules and I visited both sets of parents, God was in his heaven, and all was right with the world. At least our little piece of it. I even cut down on cigarettes, and started to put on weight.

Then, on the sixth anniversary exactly of Louise’s death, I got home from work to Jules’ place where she’d promised to cook me dinner, and it had all come on top.

Of course I had a key to the flat, and the first thing I saw when I’d let myself in through the front door was Percy giving himself a quick wash and brush-up by the foot of the stairs.

I looked at him, he looked at me, and I knew that this was a bad news day. I’d known it since I’d woken up, and his being there confirmed it.

I walked down the hall to the kitchen. The door was ajar, and there was a light on inside the room.

I pushed the door all the way open, and for a moment I thought that Jules had redecorated the white walls.

In red.

But it wasn’t Dulux vermilion gloss that coated every surface.

It was blood. Hot, scarlet blood. Already turning brown in the air. Jules’ blood. My wife-to-be. And she was lying on the black and white checked vinyl floor in a pool of the stuff, with more gushing from the multiple wounds that Louise had stabbed in her body.

Louise was still bending over her, and when she saw me, she stood up, wiped the blade of the kitchen knife she was holding on her skirt, and stuck the point of it into the butcher’s block that rested on one of the work surfaces.

‘Hello Paul,’ she said. ‘Supper’s nearly ready.’

I went straight to Jules, but it was too late. She was dead. I knelt in her blood and tried to revive her, but all I managed to do was to cover myself in the stuff. Big mistake number one. Too much blood, I thought. Too much blood for her to have in such a small body.

When I realized it was useless, I stood and tore the knife from where Louise had stuck it, and went looking for her. Oh yeah, I can hear you say it. A stupid thing to do. But I did it anyway. Maybe you would’ve done the same thing under the circumstances. Big mistake, number two, you might say.

Of course she was gone. Percy too. So I did what any good citizen would do at a time like that.

I called the emergency services.

You see I've always prided myself on being a good citizen. Big mistake number three.

So naturally the coppers arrived with the ambulance. They took one look at me and hustled me into the living room to wait for the CID.

Ten minutes later, a pair of plainclothes police got to the house, and the fun really began.

Have you ever tried to explain to the law that your ex-girlfriend, dead exactly six years to the day, had turned your current fiancé into steak Diane on the kitchen floor? Or steak Julia in this case.

Don't bother.

It doesn't wash.

They cautioned and charged me when I'd told them my full name, and they drove me to the station, where, after being processed through, I was taken to an interview room. One of them, the youngest, put on a tape recorder, and they started.

What made it worse was that just then, Louise walked into the room, carrying Percy like a baby, sat down in an empty chair in the corner, crossed her legs and joined in.

So the conversation went something like this:

'Well, Paul,' said the oldest of the two coppers. 'No "Mr". Just "Paul", all the time. 'This is a bit of a mess, isn't it?'

I agreed that it was.

'So what happened?'

I told him. From the moment I walked through the front door and saw Percy until the two policemen arrived.

He seemed quite amused by the notion. I'm sure he was the life and soul of the police social club.

'They're never going to believe you,' said Louise.

I didn't answer. I figured I was in enough trouble as it was.

'Come on, Paul,' said the young one. 'You don't really expect us to believe all that.'

'See,' said Louise.

'It's the truth,' I said.

'Why did you kill her?' said the older copper.

'I didn't.'

'Was it a lover's spat that went too far? Or was she playing away? Or you?'

'It was nothing like that,' I replied. 'I've told you what happened. And that's all there is to it.'

‘Right,’ said the young one. ‘Let’s run this by one more time. You’re telling me that last year, your girlfriend Louise Spenser, who at this time had been dead for five years, came to visit you.’

I nodded. ‘Yes,’ I said for the benefit of the tape.

‘With her cat? Who is also dead.’

I nodded again. ‘Yes.’

‘And since then, although you had since become engaged to the deceased, she’s been visiting you on a regular basis.’

Nod three. ‘That’s correct,’ I added for something different to say.

‘With her cat,’ said the older guy.

‘We mustn’t forget the cat,’ said the young one.

‘I know it sounds ridiculous,’ I said.

‘No,’ said the young cop. ‘We get this sort of thing all the time.’

‘Told you,’ said Louise.

‘Will you be quiet?’ I blurted.

‘Who me?’ said the young one.

‘No,’ I replied.

The older guy, who was a bit more suss, said, ‘She’s here now, isn’t she?’

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘Where?’

‘Sitting in that chair.’

He sighed, got up and walked towards it. But Louise was too quick for him, and got up. He sat down on the seat she’d vacated, and said smugly. ‘Still here, is she?’

‘No,’ I said.

‘I think it’s time for a refreshment break,’ said the young one, and the interview was suspended.

That went on for the next twenty-four hours.

I got a lawyer who advised me that I make no further comment on the charges. But the evidence was overwhelming.

I was found covered in Jules’ blood, the knife had my fingerprints all over it. I was famous for going off the rails with drink and drags, and to put the tin lid on it, I was telling a preposterous story about the ghost of my dead girlfriend.

My brief advised me to go for a plea of temporary insanity.

I stuck to my story.

I was banged up in the remand wing at Brixton, but kept separate from the other prisoners.

Louise and Percy came and went like they owned the place. It was okay. They were a bit of company for me.

Of course no one else could see them, so I made a bit of a name for myself as being totally mad.

Radio Rental, the screws called me — mental.

The case went to trial at the Old Bailey. I pleaded not guilty, but as I had no defence, the case only lasted for a day. Every paper in the land covered it fully, and Louise and Percy sat with the defence counsel throughout.

The jury convened for less than half an hour, and when they came back, they brought in a guilty verdict.

So that's my story. Not the happiest one, I agree.

But things have worked out okay. I've got a nice room. No sharp corners, and lots of cartoons on cable.

Louise and Percy never go away now, and that's how it was always meant to be.

The three of us together. No worries about the mortgage, or where the next meal is coming from.

Daffy Duck is on now, which is kind of ironic. And there's liver and bacon for supper.

I'm not mad, you know, whatever they say. Louise will tell you that, won't you Louise?

Well, she would if she was in the mood.

* * *

Mark Timlin describes himself as a writer of pulp fiction, whose most famous character is private investigator Nick Sharman. This South London sleuth has so far appeared in one collection of short stories and some thirteen novels, the latest being *A Street that Rhymed at 3am,* published by Gollancz. Sharman was also the titular hero of a television series that Timlin describes as finishing a number of careers and was reviewed by one daily newspaper as 'a national disgrace'. As the author explains, "'Everybody Needs Somebody to Love" was originally written for the first One Day Novel Competition in 1994, in which a score or more writers sat for two twelve-hour sessions over one weekend in London's Groucho Club. It didn't win for several reasons, and I still subscribe that it wasn't because it wasn't the best. I read the winners and the runners-up and they didn't hack it. Firstly, it isn't a novel, being something less than nine thousand words long. And secondly, it may have something to do with the fact that I spent most of the second session upstairs in the green room as far away as possible from where the writing was going on, getting thoroughly zapped on free booze and goading a small coterie of fellow writers

into excesses of mickey-taking out of the organizers, the other competitors and the club. Anyway, that's my excuse and I'm going to stick with it. I don't know why I entered the damned competition in the first place, having already had a load of books published and the prize not being worth a candle. As for the subject matter,' adds Timlin, 'that I *was* serious about, as the first part at least is the story of a true relationship of mine and I'm glad to see it published properly at last. And hey, I'm finally getting paid for it.'

Sous Rature
JAY RUSSELL

When the phone rings in the middle of the night, most people think: who died?

I know it's only Klein.

'I don't understand this *sous rature* stuff, Steve. How the hell does the bastard get away with it? I mean, he just crosses the bloody words out and then leaves them there on the page like squashed bugs. Doesn't that bother anyone? Isn't there a law? Doesn't it drive you crazy?'

Our apartment sits just off-campus, in a neatly appointed professorial ghetto. The phone rests on the floor across the room from the bed because the cord won't reach to the night stand. I don't know why we haven't just bought a cordless — or moved the bed — but that's the way it is.

Elaine sleeps right through the calls. She used to bolt awake and roll off the bed, grabbing the receiver in one smooth motion. It amazed me how she could answer in a crisp, businesslike voice. As if it wasn't the middle of the night; as if she hadn't been stone dead to the world two seconds earlier.

Now she doesn't even turn over.

'It's because he's French, isn't it? They get away with *every*thing. I can live with Baudrillard's bullshit, and even that crazy Virilio. But this *erasure* thing is too much. I mean, it's up there with Jerry Lewis and Jean-Marie Le Pen. It's, you know…*God,* it's brilliant. It fits.'

I knew I'd regret lending Klein the Derrida books. I knew it would mean a lost night's sleep.

'Klein…'

'I just, I can't fully make sense of it. Steve, this is your field. You've got to explain it to me. I… I think I see where it fits — it's *so* bloody fractal — but I just can't quite…I'm afraid I'm going to have to really learn French for this guy, Steve. I mean, not just that oo-la-la crap that got me through Foucault. He's…'

'Do you know what time it is, Klein?'

'Uhhhh. hold on.'

'No, Klein…'

Too late. I glanced at Elaine. I wondered if the little bug inside her was awake or asleep. The duvet had become twisted around her slightly swollen belly. A thin line of saliva trailed from her mouth, watering the faded flowers on the pillowcase.

'It's almost three-thirty.'

‘Klein. ’ I sighed and stared vacantly at Elaine’s heavy breasts.

‘You really have to go back to Heidegger,’ I began.

I started having doubts about fractals and such the day one of my undergrads — a gaunt, black-clad cultural studies major with the unlikely moniker of B. Bronski — came to class wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with the Mandelbrot set on the front and ‘I ♥ Chaos’ on the back. This same kid handed in a term paper with the title: ‘The Prosthetic Aesthetic: Fractal Postmodernism in the Cyberpunk/ Splatterpunk Imperative.’ After that I figured it was only a matter of time before old Benoit himself performed a turn on *Oprah.*

Not that I entirely understand the stuff. If poked sternly with a pointed stick I can creditably acquit myself with an explication of strange attractors and sensitive dependence on initial conditions — God knows, I’ve heard Klein go on about it enough — but it’s still something of a strain for me. A lifetime in comparative literature departments has taken its toll on a scientific aptitude which wasn’t terrific to begin with.

Once upon a time, I dreamed about becoming an astronomer — next best thing to astronaut — but Cs and Ds in physics and calculus quickly stymied such fancies and sent me running for the shelter of Chaucer’s little helpers.

Still, my interest never entirely waned. I kept up with Drexler on nanotechnology, and was hyping VR and cyber-culture *long* before *Wired* magazine. Barnsley and Gleick and all the others opened up new worlds for me even as I completed my doctorate in English. I sprang for a top-of-the-line PC and high-res monitor when that kind of stuff was still an arm and a leg, and played with fractal-generating software, staying up into the wee hours, reliving the ‘star-gate’ sequence from *2001*.

And I re-channelled my interest from science to science fiction, cajoling the department chair into letting me teach a graduate seminar by throwing a little Pynchon and Lessing in with the Dick and Ballard. I set to work on the *definitive* study of Olaf Stapledon and even scammed some funding to organize a small conference on popular science and science fiction.

Which was where I met Klein.

‘Klein call?’

I nodded and gave Elaine a mug and a kiss. It was a morning ritual and sort of unwritten contract that I get up first and bring her tea in bed. I like it. The ritual, I mean. Like any red-blooded American — even a Yank at (well, *near)* Oxford — I hate tea.

‘He wake you? I didn’t see you stir.’

She took a series of quick, tiny sips, the way the dog laps his water, and leaned back against the pillows.

'No,' she said, 'but I dreamed of bells.'

'Wedding bells?'

'Don't be a cheek. What did he want this time?'

I stood at the mirror adjusting my tie. My sole sop to respectability. I ran the back of my fingers under my chin and decided maybe I should have shaved after all.

'He wanted me to explain deconstruction to him.'

'Aauuuughhh,' Elaine laughed and Darjeeling sprayed out of her nose. She dabbed at it with her nightie, still giggling. 'What in the world for?'

I stared at my face in the mirror. A nasty zit was blooming in the crease between my nose and cheek, and my hair had visibly thinned again during the night. Where did it go?

'You know Klein. He's on to another of his big ideas. Something about a relationship between deconstruction and chaos theory. Really, the bastard already knows it better than I do. You remember Derrida's notion of *sous rature,* putting things under erasure?'

Elaine half-squinted at me. 'Ehhhhh. '

I sat on the edge of the bed, softly rubbing her belly. I often do it without even thinking. 'You know how he writes a word, then crosses it out, but leaves the crossed-out expression in the text?'

'I think I vaguely remember. It's been a while, though, and I could never stomach any of that crap.'

'Yeah, it's all a bit of a con. Or a decon. But erasure's meant to indicate a concept or idea that's under question or whose meaning is to be doubted. An idea that's been negated, but not dismissed. By placing it *sous rature,* it can be there and not there at the same time. Well, that's a nasty simplification, but you get the idea.'

'Uh-huh. '

'So Klein thinks this somehow ties in with fractal geometry. After reading some Derrida, he's decided that deconstruction is, and I quote, "a chaotic philosophical function". And he claims that the process is dangerous because it has fractal contours. Something about gamma matrices approaching a threshold in maximum likelihood models.'

'Sorry?'

'I know, I know. He explained it to me for an hour, but I didn't get it, and it was four o'clock in the damn morning. Anyway, he's all excited about it, so we're going to meet for lunch. But you know Klein.'

'We all know Klein,' Elaine sighed. I kissed her again and headed out the door. I thought she said something and stuck my head back in the room.

‘How’s that?’

Her hands were folded over the empty mug resting lightly on her bulging stomach and she stared at the wall with her head cocked slightly to one side.

‘I thought I heard bells again,’ she said.

The student union is the oldest building on campus: a massive Gothic structure embraced by thick tendons of ivy and perched at the edge of Library Slope. The Senior Common Room offers a stunning view of the valley below and a sparkling expanse of water to the northwest. The place was packed, but Klein had already secured seats. The canteen food was your basic pre-processed, post-industrial gruel, but the university subsidizes the prices so there’s always a queue.

Klein looked his usual dishevelled self, every bit the absent-minded professor. He wore a creased, sky blue shirt that was a couple of sizes too big, with the cuffs flapping loose and the buttons fastened all the way up to his chin. His black polyester pants nearly matched the shade of his peeling Hush Puppies, but he wore them at high tide depth and they didn’t go at all with the brown socks that drooped around his bony ankles. Klein’s kinky red hair was thin across the top, lending him an unfortunate Bozo the Clown look exaggerated by his over-large nose. The bags under his eyes were thick and dark as war paint, and magnified by a pair of cheap glasses that were filthy beyond belief.

Klein hadn’t shaved and had his usual odour about him. It was the smell of someone who’s just come off a lengthy flight: not dirty, exactly, but musky and tired. Klein works odd hours and on more than one occasion I’ve been around when his wife — a truly stunning redhead named Margaritte — has had to publicly scold him about bathing. Klein never gets embarrassed; he just forgets such mundanities.

‘You see the paper?’ he said by way of greeting.

‘Let me guess: rationing on soap and water.’

Klein looked puzzled for a moment, then unselfconsciously sniffed at his armpit. An elderly administrative type at the next table snorted, but Klein didn’t notice.

‘Oh,’ he shrugged. ‘Sorry. I’ve been working.’

‘What’s in the news?’ I smiled.

He handed me a copy of the *Guardian,* folded over to the Style page.

‘You fashion beast!’ I said. He grinned like a kid and pointed at the lead item.

It was about a new line of women’s clothing. The patterns were to be fractal-based and there was considerable to-do about how they

mirrored nature's own true design, with some outrageous pseudo-scientific doublespeak about chaos theory and complexity.

'Old B. Bronski's ahead of his time,' I mumbled.

'Heh?'

'Nothing. Yeah, so what? You could have predicted something like this. I think people already have. Christ, the bookstore sells fractal postcards.'

'Read the sidebar.'

I skimmed the accompanying article. It was about the manufacturing process that had been devised for producing the clothes. The process was also rooted in fractal concepts, so that a standard assembly line could be employed, but every item produced would be subtly different. The idea was to create complete uniqueness within the confines of mass production. The engineer who designed the system was quoted as saying that his software package was going to revolutionize every aspect of assembly line manufacturing.

'Interesting,' I said, digging into my salad, 'but also a little scary in that zany, fin-de-millennial way.'

'Scary how?' Klein's eyes were alight.

'If this is right, it maybe changes — or changes again — the definition of "unique". If you can mass-produce singularity, then what does it mean? What possible value could be left for such a notion?'

Klein nodded approval and handed me the business page with a short item circled in red. Grundrisse-Rand had commissioned Frank Gehry to design their new EU headquarters in Bonn. It would be the first corporate commission of a piece of deconstructivist architecture, and one of the few major deconstructivist designs to be realized.

'Yeah, I heard about this the other day on Radio 4. I thought the deconstructivist thing was yesterday's news, but I guess *someone's* interested. Gehry's still hot, at least.'

'But what do you make of it?'

'I can't say I much care for it, at least not the sketches I've seen. The stuff makes me sort of dizzy with all those odd angles and exposed superstructure. Very Weimar, somehow. Decadent. The kind of thing that's fun in theory, but awful for the poor saps who'll have to live and work in it. But then I don't really know much about architecture.'

'Bloody hell!' Klein said, slapping his palm on the spread-out paper. 'I'm talking about two articles on the same day in the fucking *Guardian!* Fractals and deconstruction!'

'Yeah?'

'It's the ideas, Steve. Don't you see. The ideas.'

'Yeah?' I tried again.

'It's what I was talking about last night. You know that there are

very precise mathematical models for how things are diffused in culture? It doesn't matter what — VCRs, compact discs, AIDS — they're all the same in these models. Threshold criteria and critical mass levels determining rates of adoption. It's all very calculable and occurs along an exaggerated S-shaped curve, with a small number of people adopting early on, then an explosion during which most everyone else climbs on the bandwagon.'

'Sounds reasonable.'

'Well, the thing is that it works for ideas and concepts, too. And what's more, I think that when certain ideas — in the form of the things we call theories — fulfil those critical mass requirements, they become something more. Something. substantial.'

'Don't know if that's true, but it sounds neat,' I said. 'I can't even balance my chequebook so I don't know from math models, but… well…what do you mean substantial? You mean accepted, right?'

'No, Steve. I *mean* substantial. Palpable. Real. And it's dangerous as hell.'

I was shaking my head. 'You said that on the phone last night — this morning — but I still don't follow.'

'There's a very thin line separating conception from reality. From the idea of something being true to that selfsame thing becoming physical law.'

'Ahem,' I said.

'Okay, look. You know that everything we do, everything we build, the entire design of the western world is more or less based on parameters set forth in Euclidean geometry.'

'I suppose I know that somewhere.'

'Exactly. Well, mathematicians have always known that Euclidean geometry is itself based on certain approximations of reality — lousy approximations, it turns out — but they've always just brushed that little matter aside and stuck it under the label of "assumptions". They've gone ahead and said it doesn't matter.

'But Euclid is the law for most of us. For two thousand years we've regarded those Euclidean approximations as realer than Coca-Cola. For the vast multitudes, for *you,* to take an example, those assumptions about the logic of space and geometry aren't ignored, they're completely *unknown.* Let me ask you something. What was the world like before Euclid?'

'I don't know. It was. simpler, I guess. Smaller, more compact. Less technological, certainly.'

'Yes!' Klein practically jumped out of his chair. His glasses flew off his face and bounced on the table. He grabbed at them, smearing the lenses with butter, but stuck them right back on his nose.

'Before Euclid this wasn't a world of science and technology, it

was a world of gods and magic. Euclid came along and reshaped geometry, yes, but at the same time he reshaped an entire *cosmology!'*

'Whoa, wait a minute. Correct me if I'm wrong, but Euclid dates back to what? 300 or so BC? That cosmology of Greek and Roman gods survived him by centuries. And even then you're talking, what, hundreds of years more before things really caught on.'

'Of course!' Klein shouted. 'Because it took that long for the Euclidean conception to approach its critical mass. You couldn't pick up a paper in ancient Rome and read about how Euclid redefined the world! There was no Page Three girl to help spread word of the invention of this neat new geometry. There wasn't any CNN to tell the masses: Greek gods dead, film at ten.'

Klein was sort of bouncing up and down as he spoke and alternately enthralling and intimidating me. Generally excitable, he was now at the edge of something more extreme. The room had emptied out, but those still around eyed him with nervous apprehension or undisguised mirth.

'There was no mass media. It took hundreds of years for ideas to be made real. Now it happens in no time. Or practically no time. The first work to see chaos for what it was appeared barely three decades ago. Within a few years we have theories of fractal geometry and complexity, and philosophies of deconstruction. And now it's on Yves Saint Laurent's bloody knickers.'

'Take it easy, Klein. Sit down.'

Klein looked around. He was breathing hard and his glasses were so filthy he might as well have been wearing shades. He stood still for a moment, ran his tongue over his dry lips and flopped back into the chair.

'Two thousand years ago Euclid killed the gods. What's going to happen this time?'

I had no idea, but strongly suspected that Klein didn't have it quite right. The other diners went back to their affairs. I started to proffer a counter-argument when Klein's already ashen pallor went even whiter.

'Shit,' he said and got up. I turned around and saw Margaritte eyeing us from the door. Klein ran over to his wife, but she didn't look happy. They started arguing almost at once, then she stormed off. He trudged after her, pressing his glasses to his face with one hand and I heard their rising voices carrying on down the hall. Shaking my head and smiling at the onlookers with a 'well-what-can-you-do?' kind of grin, I gathered up his books and papers and took them with me. I didn't know what to think of Klein's theory, but I was frankly worried for his mental health.

Rightly so, as it turned out. For I would never see him alive again.

Klein called at 4:02:35. Ah, the priceless precision of the digital age.

I grabbed the phone on the second ring. Elaine never moved. I'd neither seen nor heard from Klein for ten days following our lunch, though I'd tried to call him. In the interim I'd come across an article in the *Spectator* decrying the dangerous political correctness of the deconstructive influence in schools, and seen two TV news features relating to chaotic processes on the Internet. One even featured a sound bite from Mandelbrot.

'Hi, Steve.'

It was a most un-Kleinlike greeting. He sounded tired and hoarse and out of sorts.

'Hey, Klein. How are you?'

'It looks bad, Steve. I'm frightened.'

'What? Of what? What's wrong?'

I glanced over and saw that Elaine was awake and watching me. I spoke softly, but there was an edge to my tone that must have got though to her. She looked groggy but concerned.

'I've been running the models, Steve. Exact calculations. Thousands of iterations before the equations converged. Soon that won't work any more, you know. Iterative processes are doomed. But for now, for a little while longer, maximum likelihood estimates don't lie. Though I wish they did.'

'Klein…Have you been drinking?'

Elaine's eyebrows leapt up like grasshoppers. I'd never known Klein to imbibe anything stronger than tea with lemon.

'A little. Margaritte keeps a supply, you know.'

I didn't wonder. 'Are things, you know, okay with you and Margaritte? After the other day and all?'

There was a lengthy pause with only line noise and Klein's deviated septum to fill the silence.

'I. that is, Margaritte. we're approaching a threshold, too. It's all gone to turbulence, now, and I can see the edge. I can *feel* it, Steve. I… I know it doesn't matter. In the bigger picture, I mean. The equations, the models, they prove it. But still. Shit, Steve. It still, you know, it *hurts.'*

There was another staticky silence. I hesitated, but with my eyes fixed on Elaine's, decided to go ahead.

'Listen to me, Klein. You can't always…depend on the numbers. They're like you were saying with Euclid, you know? They're not quite real. They're just representations and they're different from people. Abstract. People aren't fixed things. Even when you think they are.'

'I don't know, Steve. '

‘What I’m about to tell you, I’ve never talked about before and I… *we* don’t like to think about it. Especially now. But I’m going to tell you. All right?’

I was talking to Klein, but looking at Elaine. She nodded back at me.

‘My first teaching position was back in the States, right out of my doctorate. It was a shit-hole of a department in a dull Midwestern town and it was horrible. Elaine was miserable. She had left behind her job and all her friends because it was the only position I could get and we were committed to staying together.

‘Well, let’s just say that things got bad. Real bad. I had a killer teaching load and the town was full of overqualified faculty spouses, so Elaine couldn’t find any work. I’d come home tired and mean and she’d be angry and bored. For a while we communicated through grunts and yells.’

‘Steve. ’

‘Just listen, Klein. It was the end of the semester and we hadn’t. been together for weeks. I was starting to browse the classifieds for studio apartments. So it’s right around finals time — and you know, I’ve got a couple, three hundred undergrads and it’s just pure chaos, you’ll pardon the expression — when this perky little sophomore comes to see me. She’s a total airhead, but with one of those teenage bodies that won’t quit. And she’s failing the course and the door’s closed and she *knows* what she’s doing and I’m unhappy and… I don’t know, Klein, I just figured what the fuck, you know? I just… it was just an idea, Klein.

‘I hated myself for it and I still do. I figured for sure it was the end for us and probably my career. Hell, I thought maybe that’s why I did it. And I won’t lie to you, Klein, it got pretty bad. But it also brought stuff into focus. There was a lot of pain, but we found a way through it. Eventually. And my point is this: in the end I…we decided that it was all just a moment. Just an *idea,* you see? And we rose above it. We *made* healing tractable. An idea isn’t real unless you make it so. *Choose* to make it so. Otherwise it’s *only* an idea, only an abstraction. I mean, isn’t that what we were talking about?’

There was silence, and then there was laughter. Distant, dim and very scary.

‘Just an idea. Just an *idea.’* He said it over and over and was still laughing when he hung up the phone.

I tried to call him back, but the line was engaged. I crawled back into bed and kissed the tears off Elaine’s face. I tried to go back to sleep, but I kept hearing Klein’s laughter in my head.

I don’t know what time the phone rang.

Elaine had gone to bed early, but I stayed up to watch *The South Bank Show*. Melvin Bragg was interviewing Derrida.

At about half-eleven, Elaine staggered out of the bedroom clutching her belly. Her face was white as milk, and blood oozed down her thighs. She was crying and moaning and collapsed to the floor before I could get to her. I thought about calling an ambulance, but couldn't bear the wait. I lifted her up and put her in the car, then sped to the local hospital in a panicked daze.

Elaine lost the baby, but it was worse than that. Her uterus had become malformed in the pregnancy. It was actually touch and go for a while, although the surgeon didn't tell me that until later. The doctor also said she had never seen or heard of anything quite like it before, and asked if Elaine had ever worked around radioactive or toxic substances. I couldn't make any sense of it then, but of course anything and everything is explainable now.

I left the hospital confused and exhausted, but satisfied that Elaine was going to be okay.

The police were waiting for me when I got home. A detective accompanied by a pair of PCs. I immediately assumed something had happened to Elaine.

'Steven Rich?' the detective asked.

I managed a nod.

He mumbled his name, but I didn't catch it. 'Do you know a Dr Paul Klein?'

Another nod.

'When did you last have contact with him?'

'A week or two ago. Why? What's going on? Is this about Elaine? Is Elaine all right?'

The detective glanced at one of the constables who started back toward the car. 'I don't know about any Elaine, sir. But Dr Klein killed his wife and took his own life early this morning. Your phone number was found on his person. Did he call you at any time last night or early today?'

I never thought of myself as a fainter, but things went black around me. I felt like Dorothy caught up in the twister and carried over the rainbow into some alien landscape. Fortunately the cop caught me by the arm and helped me to a sitting position on the front steps.

I told him in rambling terms about Elaine and what had happened the previous night. That I knew Klein and Margaritte were having troubles, but that his news was an utter shock. He clucked sympathetically and tried to look interested.

'Okay,' he said. 'We may want to talk to you some more, but that can wait. Why don't you get some rest now.'

The cop helped me inside and guided me to the living room sofa where I collapsed. He closed the front door softly as he left and I fell quickly and deeply asleep.

Neither of us thought to check the blinking light on the answerphone.

Our answering machine is an old model — it works well enough that I never saw any reason to buy a fancier one — but it only gives you sixty seconds to leave a message.

'I've been running the equations for days, Steve, but they won't converge. The iterations will go on for ever now.

'I was grading exams the other day, you know? The first-year class. A girl wrote out elaborate calculations for a problem that didn't require it, a problem with a simple answer. In the end she just put a big "X" through it all and gave up. I saw it as *sous rature* and gave her full credit.

'It's coming now, Steve. Almost here. I thought I should warn you. We're at the base of the S-curve, but the explosion will happen soon. The numbers don't. didn't lie.

'I put her under erasure. Margaritte. I thought it was for the best. The only thing I wish. '

Sixty seconds.

I remember Klein once told me about something called luminiferous aether. It was an early, discarded notion in physics, like spontaneous generation or phlogiston. Aether was supposed to be the medium which filled all unoccupied space and was the mechanism for transmission of magnetic and electrical forces. Klein said that there had been some promising work verifying its existence and the idea was catching on until Einstein disproved it all with relativity. Klein always repeated the same thing when the topic of relativity came up.

'Hell of an idea,' he would say.

Elaine came home from the hospital after a week. We talked about the baby and about Klein and Margaritte. She cried a lot and told me she understood if I didn't want to stay with her now, but I just told her to hush and held her tight. I didn't let her hear the phone message, nor did I voice my suspicions, but after a while she pieced it together herself.

The curve is on the rise: Klein's explosion has started to detonate and the world has begun to change. It's hard to keep up with because it's hard to know what's real, what you can count on to remain solid, consistent from day to day.

The world doesn't meet at right angles any more. All the assumptions that we've depended on for so long have crawled out of

the rotten woodwork of our lives. The old formulae don't add up and the new ones are still a mystery. I know it's what Klein suspected, but I'm also sure that it's less awful than he feared. It is certain that he overreacted; living *sous rature* is still better than dying under it.

Like bugs or fish that spend their lives in the darkness, this sudden flash of bold light has sent all of us scurrying in turbulent new directions. It's scary, but it's sort of interesting, too. At times it's even wondrous. God knows, it's chaotic, but not without its own subtleties of order.

Mostly, it's a hell of an idea.

* * *

Jay Russell's contribution to *Dark Terrors 2,* 'Lily's Whisper', was one of two stories from that volume selected by Ellen Datlow for *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror: Tenth Annual Collection.* His third novel, *Burning Bright,* a sequel to *Celestial Dogs,* was recently published in Britain, while American and French editions of *Celestial Dogs* and his other novel, *Blood,* are also scheduled over the next year. '"Sous Rature" is the piece of fiction that probably comes most directly from my years in academia,' recalls Russell. 'Although I was not in either a scientific discipline or a literature department (it probably shows), I did spend more than my fair share of time immersed in the kind of loopy "post-" theory which figures in the story. In fact, I once seriously intended to write a scholarly essay about cyberpunk and call it "The Prosthetic Aesthetic". Thanks to whatever gods there be, I never got around to it.'

Spanky's Back In Town
CHRISTOPHER FOWLER

1. The History of Rasputin's Casket

'Can't we go any faster?' Dmitry turned around in the seat, punching at the driver's fur-clad back. Behind him one of the wolves had almost caught up with the rear-runners of the sleigh and was snapping at the end of his flapping scarf.

'This is new snow over old,' the driver shouted. 'The tracks have hardened and will turn us over.'

The horses were terrified, their heads twisting, their eyes rolling back in fear of the baying creatures behind the sleigh. Scarcely daring to look, Dmitry counted seven — now eight — of the wolves, swarming so close that he could feel their hot breath on the icy rushing air. He glanced down at the terrified child in his arms and pulled the bearskin more tightly around her deathly pale face.

'We'll never make it in time,' cried Yusupov, 'it will be dark before we reach Pokrovskoye.'

They could see the black outline of the town on the horizon, but already the sun was dropping below the tops of the trees. The sleigh clattered and crunched its way across deep-frozen cart tracks, swaying perilously, the wolves howling close behind, falling over each other in their efforts to keep up. One of the largest, a fearsome yellow-eyed beast the size of a Great Dane, suddenly threw itself forward and seized Dmitry's scarf-end in its jaws. The wool pulled tight, choking him as he clawed at his throat. Yusupov yanked it away from his brother's neck and pulled hard, feeling the weight of the animal on the other end. 'See, Dmitry,' he cried, 'look in the eyes of our pursuer now!'

He released the scarf sharply and the creature fell back, tumbling over itself. But it had his scent, and would follow the sleigh into the darkness until its jaws were filled. Dmitry cradled the infant in his arms, protecting her from buffets as the sleigh hammered over a ridge of ice. They had taken her hostage to effect their escape from the private apartments of Rasputin himself, but now they no longer had need of her. After all, the casket was now in their possession, and its value was beyond calculation. He knew that Yusupov was thinking the same thing. Behind them, the wolves were becoming braver, jumping at the rear of the sledge, trying to gain a hold with their forepaws. Thick ribbons of spittle fell along the crimson velvet plush of the seat-

back as the animals yelped and barked in frustrated relay.

'They will not stop until they feed,' he shouted. 'We must use the child. She slows us down.'

'But she is innocent!'

'If we fail in our mission, many thousands of innocents will perish.'

'Then do it and be damned!'

Dmitry slipped the wild-eyed girl from the bear-fur. In one scooping motion he raised her above his head, then threw her over the end of the sleigh. She had only just begun to scream as the wolves imploded over her, seizing her limbs in their muscular jaws. The two young Bolsheviks watched for a moment as the animals swarmed around their meal, the sleigh briefly forgotten. The child's cries were quickly lost beneath the angry snarling of the feed. A sudden splash of blood darkened the evening snow. The driver huddled tighter over his reins, determined not to bear witness to such events. The next time he dared to look back, all he could see was a distant dark stain against the endless whiteness, and the sated wolves slinking away with their heads bowed between their shoulders, ashamed of their own appetites.

Yusupov studied the horizon once more, trying to discern the lights of the approaching town. He was twenty-three, and had already felt the hand of death close over him. He prayed that Casparov would be waiting at the bridge, that he had found a way of evading their pursuer. It was essential for them to find a hiding place for the casket in Pokrovskoye.

'Perhaps we are safe now,' said Dmitry as the sleigh turned towards the smoking chimneys of the town. 'May we have the strength to do what must be done.'

'Our story begins in the reign of Tsar Nicholas II, in the year 1908,' said Dr Harold Masters, studying his uninterested students as they lolled in their seats. 'Starving Bolsheviks fled across Russia with a precious cargo; a jewelled casket fashioned by Karl Fabergé and stolen from Rasputin himself, its contents unknown — and yet the men in the sleigh were willing to die to preserve it. Their flight from Rasputin's secret shrine at St Petersburg was doomed, but before they were brutally murdered in mysterious circumstances, we know that the casket was passed on, to make its way in time to New York.

'In the late 1920s a family of wealthy Franco-Russian emigrants who had escaped to America on the eve of the October revolution sailed on the SS *Britannique* to Liverpool. The ship's passenger inventory tells us that the jewel-box was in their possession then, listed as inherited family property. But following the tragedy on board their ship. '

The sun had set an hour ago, but the sea was still blacker than the sky. Alexandrovich Novikov stood watching the churning wake of the ship, his gloved left hand clasping the wooden railing. Powerful turbines throbbed far beneath his feet, and he rode the waves, balancing as the liner crested the rolling swell of the sea. Back in the state room his wife, his brother and his children chattered excitedly about their new life in England, trying to imagine what, for them, was quite unimaginable. They would have new names, he had decided, European names that others would be able to pronounce without difficulty. They were being given a second chance, and this time the family would prosper and grow. There remained but one task for him to accomplish; the removal of the final obstacle to their safety. He reached inside his coat and withdrew the Fabergé casket. The value of the jewelled casing meant nothing to him, for its loss was but a small price to pay for the safekeeping of his family.

He weighed it in his hand, worried that the rising wind might catch and smash it against the side of the ship. He had drawn back his arm, ready to hurl it into the tumbling foam below, when someone snatched at his coattail, spinning him around and causing him to lose balance on the tilting wet deck. Before he could draw breath, the stars filled his vision and he saw the railing pass beneath his legs, then the great black steel side of the ship, as the sound of the monstrous churning propellors pounded up around him.

Sinking into the ocean, Alexandrovich Novikov was dragged under by the great spinning blades and cleft in two, the pieces of his body lost for ever in the frothing white foam. On the deck he had left, the unthrown casket slid beneath a stairwell with the rolling of the ship and was retrieved by a passing steward, whereupon the alarm was raised and a frantic search begun for its missing owner.

‘And so we arrive in London,’ continued Dr Masters. ‘The bereaved Franco-Russian family who moved there from Liverpool in 1928 planned to build property in the city — but their assets were badly damaged in the financial crash of the following year. The headquarters of their empire, a magnificent building on the north bank of the Thames designed by the great Lubetkin, went unfinished. There, the trail of Rasputin’s jewelled box finally goes cold. We have to presume that it was sold off to the owner of a private collection as the family fought debts and a series of appalling personal tragedies. ’

The building beside the old Billingsgate Market had never been properly finished, and now its poorly-set foundations had been pulled up to clear the site and make way for a new Japanese banking

syndicate. It was during the third month of digging, just prior to the new concrete foundations being poured into their moulds, that the little casket, wrapped in an oilskin cloth and several layers of mildewed woven straw, was unearthed. The find was briefly mentioned on the six o'clock news that night, and excited speculation from experts about what might be discovered inside.

Before the box could be opened, however, it was sent to the British Museum to be cleaned and X-rayed. From the ornamentation of an exposed corner section of the casing it was already assumed to have been manufactured by a Russian jeweller, possibly the great Fabergé himself, which made it extremely valuable and placed it in the ownership of the royal court of Tsar Nicholas. It was, perhaps, too early to hope that the box might contain documents pertaining to that fascinating, tragic family.

The casket was entrusted to an unlikely recipient, a twenty-seven-year-old woman named Amy Dale who worked at the museum. In usual circumstances such a high-profile find would have been offered for examination to one of the more experienced senior staff, but Amy was having an affair with a hypertense married man named Miles Bernardier who functioned as the present director of the excavation, and Miles was able to take a procedural shortcut that allowed him to assign the find himself. This was not as dishonest as it sounds, for Amy was fast becoming recognized as a luminary in her field, and as her own department head was overseas for two months advising an excavation in Saudi Arabia, the pleasurable task of uncovering the casket's secrets fell to her.

The night before Amy was due to have the casket X-rayed, a supposedly psychic friend from the Mediterranean ceramics department seized her hands in the Museum Tavern and warned her that something strange was about to happen in her life. She pushed a hand through her frizzy blonde hair, laughing off his prediction, and ordered up another round of drinks. While they drank and chatted, the mud-encrusted casket, sealed in a large Ziploc bag, sat in a basement vault of the British Museum waiting for its secrets to be exposed to the light.

2. The Appearance of the Daemon

The sun was scorching down in a sapphire sky the morning Spanky came back to town. The wind had changed direction, from the faintest breeze drifting down across the south to a fierce fresh blast that stippled the surface of the Thames and brushed against pedestrians in the Strand, ruffling them like hair being combed the

wrong way.

Balancing delicately as he placed one patent black Church's Oxford-toecapped shoe after the other, Spanky walked along the electrified third rail of the London, Chatham & Dover Railway, crossed the bridge over the river into Cannon Street station and carefully sniffed the air. Beneath the fumes of the choked city, behind the oil of machinery and ozone crackle of electricity, beyond the perfumes and deodorants and the smell of warm working flesh, he caught the faintest tang of enamel and oilskin, wolf urine and sea-brine and city soil. It was quite enough to tell him that the object of his search was within a five-mile radius.

On the station platform he almost melted into the crowd, just another devilishly handsome young man arriving in the teeming city with an unrevealed agenda. Spanky's purpose, though, was single and specific; to locate the casket currently residing in the vault at Amy Dale's department.

A smile teased those who caught his eye; he permitted himself that. He could afford to be happy, for the battle was already half-won. He had seen the girl on television, speaking nervously into a microphone, pointing back at a great hole in the ground. The network had even taken the trouble to label her for him, displaying her name and place of employment. It only remained for him to meet with the girl and explain, in calm and rational tones, that he needed her to give back what was rightfully his.

Nah, he thought, I'll just take the casket and rip her guts into bloody shreds — to teach her a lesson.

Spanky was weary of walking the earth. He loathed gravity. If only he could shed his cloak of skin, free himself of his fleshy shackles and return to the skies. It was not possible yet; he could only operate in corporeal form. And he had been here too long, so long he had almost forgotten his true purpose, shifting from one body to the next, growing careless, even being cheated and forced to flee by an idiot mortal — the shame of it! How the mighty had fallen! He had hidden in two further bodies since that humiliating day. A balding, overweight ambulance attendant had provided him with a temporary home until he found someone more appropriate. This new body had belonged to one Chad Morrison, a none-too-bright twenty-seven-year-old male model with wavy black hair, shocking blue eyes and a jawline as sleek as the contours of a classic coupé. It would certainly last him until he had reclaimed the contents of the casket. After that, he would have no further reason to return to earth and live among these miserable mortals, not when Paradise beckoned.

Out in the street, he listened to the sounds that lay hidden beneath the belching traffic and chattering offices. Spanky's senses

were attenuated far beyond mortal range. He had heard the girl speak on television. In the maelstrom of humanity he could find her voice again, as easily as plucking a single yellow flower in a forest of bluebells. Satisfied that his instincts were correct, he set off along the pavement at a brisk clip, a jaunty swagger in his step and a cheery whistle on his lips. This time he would cover his tracks as he went. A trip to the excavation was called for. Then on to the girl and the treasure.

From the Thames, the gap between the buildings was like a missing tooth. Square off-white office blocks rose on either side. Thundering drills and a pair of slender yellow cranes picked at the site like dentists' utensils.

Miles Bernardier stood at the edge of the great earth-encrusted hole and peered down on the vast rusted mesh of iron rods that were about to be buried in concrete. Time had run out. He had requested a larger excavation window, and the request had been denied. Six lousy days, was that too much to ask? The wheels of commerce would not be halted, however. The DTI was worried that a historically significant find would be announced. Building would have to be stopped while the site was evaluated, and the Japanese might get cold feet. But who knew what else lay buried in the clay? The site had been repeatedly built upon for well over a thousand years. The casket had been discovered in a pocket of air created by some broken planks just eleven feet down. Beneath the rotted wood lay a brick lining from what appeared to be a far older building, but now, with the pouring of several thousand tons of concrete, it would remain undiscovered for yet another century.

Ahead of him, a piledriver was rising slowly in the air to drop its weight on one of the upright iron posts marking out the building perimeter. Bernardier adjusted his yellow hard hat against the buffeting wind from the river, and carefully skirted the edge of the pit. He wanted to call Amy, to see if she had started work on the casket, but the noise was too great here. He was walking back to one of the foremen's cabins when something pushed at the backs of his legs, and he slipped over on to the wet clay soil.

'Damn!' He rose awkwardly, inspected the damage, then looked about for someone to blame. There was no one within five hundred yards, and no sound but the rising wind and the dull thud of the piledriver. Bernardier was due to have lunch in the city today, and the knees of his suit were smeared with gobbets of mud. He wondered if there was time to go home and change. For a moment nothing moved on the construction site, save for a few scraps of birds fighting the thermals above the river. Earlier the area had been filled with

workmen. Where was everyone now?

The second blow caught him hard in the small of the back, and sent him sprawling on to his face. Frightened now, he pulled himself free of the sucking mire and searched about wildly. Impossibly, the area was deserted. Clouds had momentarily darkened the sun and the site had taken on an eerie dimness, as if history had returned to an earlier time. He tried to rise from his knees, but his shoes would not grip on the slippery clay. An odd smell hung in the air, something ancient and musky. Something bad.

The third blow was to his face, and shattered both the lenses of his glasses. This time he slid straight over the edge of the hole, landing on his back at the bottom, in time to see the downward arc of the piledriver descending over him. It was too late to stop the fall of the massive steel rod, which was powered by an explosion of compressed air. The shaft slammed down, bursting his skull like a rock dropped on an Easter egg. By the time the accident siren sounded, Bernardier's twitching body had settled so deeply into the sludge that it could have been mistaken for another historical find.

'Very innocent,' Gillian was saying, 'but then you always were.' Amy held the receiver away from her ear and waved a hand at her assistant. 'The heat's too high, turn it down, it'll boil over,' and into the receiver, 'Yes, mother, I know.'

'And now this man you're seeing, do you really think it's such a good idea? I mean, he's not only married, he's your boss. Is he worth jeopardizing your career for?'

'I think I have to be the best judge of that, mother.' In truth Miles's continual philandering had almost persuaded her to end the affair, but she refused to launch on to this conversational track as it would mean hearing a new triumphant tone in her mother's voice.

'But I didn't call for this, to criticize. Who am I, just a woman who spent eight agonizing hours in labour with you. I called to say how wonderful you looked on the television. I was so proud.'

Someone had entered the room and was standing before her. Someone from outside — he didn't smell of chemicals. There was something nice in the air, old-fashioned and comforting, from her childhood. Lavender-water?

'Mother, I have to go now.' She lowered the twittering receiver back to its cradle and raised her eyes to the visitor.

'Can I help you?'

Her pulse stuttered. The man was a living angel. His pupils peered from beneath dark-knitted eyebrows like twin cobalt lasers. He had a jawline you could design a car around. Navy jacket, grey T-shirt, faded blue jeans cut tight around the crotch, brown work-boots.

Behind him, two secretaries were peering around the door in unembarrassed awe.

'Yes, you can,' said the vision. 'I'm looking for Amy Dale.'

'That's me,' she laughed, feeling as if she had won a prize. Her assistants melted away, afraid of interrupting something private.

It was here. He could smell it in the air, its history of viscera and madness. He could taste it on the tip of his tongue, the cupreous tang of blood and death and misery. So close, after all this time.

'Excuse me, I was expecting someone far less attractive.' He smiled and the heavens opened.

'Now why would you expect that?' she asked, flattered.

'The way Miles Bernardier described you—' he trailed off. 'Not like this.'

The bastard, she thought. How typical of him to denigrate her to a stranger, as though he had to frighten off potential rivals.

'Chad Morrison.' He proffered his manicured hand and she shook it.

'So, Mr Morrison,' she smiled back, puzzled by his relaxed attitude — a rare thing in a world of obsessive academics, 'what are you here for?'

'The casket,' he genially replied.

'Oh?' Her brow furrowed. Territories were jealously guarded at the museum. 'What field are you in?'

'Forgive me,' he gave his head a little shake, 'I thought Mr Bernardier had already spoken to you about this.'

'No, he's out at the excavation today.' She unbuttoned her lab coat and pointed to a glass partitioned office. 'We can talk in there.'

Seated before her, he explained, 'I'm not attached to the museum, Miss Dale. I'm mainly an advisor to auction houses in my capacity as an authority on the works of Karl Fabergé. Your director called me in to help you verify the origin of your find.'

Miles had entrusted her with the investigation. Why did he have to interfere by sending her experts? Of course, she would have had to pull in her own independent specialists, which could be a time-consuming process, so perhaps he was trying to make her job easier. The museum staff comprised many brilliant, dedicated professionals, but she was not aware of anyone with expertise in this field. Better to accept the offer. He was awfully pretty.

'Thank you, Mr Morrison. I'd be interested in your impressions of what you've heard so far, sight unseen.'

'Well.' He leaned forward a little and the scent he exuded changed. His aftershave was something spicy and musky, not at all what she expected. He looked the citrus type. 'I can forgive the Russian revolution many things, Miss Dale, but not the destruction of

Fabergé. He died in exile, you know, a broken man, his art reviled by men unable to tolerate luxury of any kind. But this find is fascinating. Its placement is correct. Fabergé knew England, and was partly educated here. Such a creation would date from the time he switched from producing jewellery and cigarette boxes to more fantastical items, say the early 1880s, before he began to produce the celebrated eggs.

'A number of objects we know he personally produced have never been traced. There are catalogue numbers and full descriptions of the missing items, and one of them fits the casket's specifications. Fabergé's sons assisted him, and there was a workshop here in London, facts which would provide circumstantial evidence for the find. Of course, there were also many forgeries produced. I would have to see the piece to be more exact.'

'I'll have to verify your appointment with Mr Bernardier. Just a formality.' She smiled and raised the telephone receiver.

He loved this part. Taking a chance. Out at the edge. He could not afford to let her find out about Bernardier, not at this stage of the game. He had no supernatural powers here, only natural ones in this earthbound body, but those would be enough. Enough to fog her senses and divert the call in her brain, to make her hear another voice.

Watching him, she mechanically punched out random digits and listened. Her mouth opened, but she did not speak. He concentrated harder. Searching her for details he found the usual human pain — aching loneliness and lack of fulfilment, but also — what was this? — Miles, not just a work colleague but a lover. Miles was sleeping with her. He probed deeper into her mind. She was not happy with the arrangement, not happy at all. He was married. Not much of a lover, either. She hadn't lost very much, then. He released her. She swayed back a little, looked flustered, lowered the receiver, aware of a vague conversation in her head, unaware of the dead line. She smiled to cover her confusion.

'That all seems to be in order, Mr Morrison. When would you like to examine the casket?'

'How about right now?' he suggested.

3. The Unveiling of the Secret

'I'm sure you understand the need for strict security in this matter,' she said, allowing a total stranger to follow her into the maze of basement corridors.

'But of course,' he agreed, sniffing the air and scenting the proximity of the treasure, barely able to contain his excitement, 'we

wouldn't want just anyone walking in here.'

Amy led the way to a further green-walled passage separated from the main building by two sets of steel doors and an electronic swipe-code. 'We have to bring items from this section up personally,' she explained. 'They can't be trusted to assistants, and they're not allowed to leave our sight until they're returned.'

Beyond the doors, a series of white-walled rooms housed large square drawers with brass handles, like a morgue. Amy checked the reference number on her requisition sheet and searched the containers.

'It's over here,' he said, lifting the index number from her mind and matching it to a nearby drawer.

Amy looked at him oddly. 'How do you know?' she asked, moving past him to check. It was the right drawer. She took a key from her pocket and slipped it into the lock. The moisture-pocked bag inside gave no clue to its contents. 'You're never sure what's best with a find like this,' she said, carefully removing the bag. 'This plastic is supposed to "breathe" and sustain a natural moisture equilibrium. We could have placed it in a dry environment, but if the casket contains paper materials they could be ruined.'

He was barely listening to her. The presence of the casket had enveloped and overwhelmed his senses. It was less than three feet from him, but he could not take it from her here. There were other technicians in the secure area. He could hear their bodyweight shifting past him in the nearby rooms. Back in the corridor he had an insane thought, that he could snatch the thing from her and escape from the building with it beneath his arm. He would have to wait until he was beyond the secure area. Another problem; in this body, he could not run. Morrison had sustained a football injury that had left him with damaged tendons in his left leg. Besides, mere escape lacked dignity. He wanted them to see what they had found. Better to wait until he was alone with Amy in the lab, after the other assistants had gone for the night. It would be foolish to screw up now, for the sake of a few hours.

'It'll be some time before we reach the interior of the package,' said Amy. 'It might be rather boring for you, but you can stay and help me if you want.'

'Just tell me what to do,' smiled Spanky, removing his jacket.

By six o'clock they had succeeded in removing the outer straw wrappers and had sectioned them for dating. The oilskin, too, had been photographed at every stage, and the whole process documented. It was laborious, but necessary if mistakes were to be prevented. Amy's chaotic blonde hair had fallen into her eyes so often that she

had bunched it back with a rubber band. She was hunched so far over the brilliantly illuminated desktop that she had developed a crick in her neck. A hot wire of pain scratched across the top of her shoulderblades as she sat up.

'Here, let me give you a massage. Tip your chair back.' Spanky lowered broad hands to her neck and pressed his thumbs down in a smooth circular motion.

'You read my mind. Thanks, that feels good.' She sat further back and closed her eyes. Another assistant scuttled from the room. 'At least we've only one layer to go, some kind of tissue.'

'Cloth-papers from Rasputin's apartment,' he said absently. 'He kept the casket out of the light and bound in calico.'

'You must be a really big authority on this,' she murmured, succumbing to the motion of his hands.

'Oh, you have no idea how big.'

'Pieces of hidden history. '

'Crossing-points of the past. Everything holds something different within. The truth becomes fabulous, and fables hold truth.' His voice had dropped to a sea-murmur. Fingers slipping over her throat.

'You soon start to see the attraction..'

'Attraction?' His hands smoothed and smoothed. The nape of her neck tingled, a warm glow spreading to the top of her breasts. She forced herself to concentrate.

'Of — archaeology.'

'Ah, of course.'

They were alone in the laboratory. The last assistant had quietly closed the door behind her.

'Right.' He swiftly removed his hands and shifted her chair-back to an upright position once more. 'Let's do it.'

She looked wide-eyed at him. 'Here?'

He gestured at the table-top. 'The last layer. Come on.'

Even with tweezers and generous smears of lubricant, the greased wrapping proved difficult to remove, and flapped back on to the casket lid. Amy peered through the illuminated magnifier. 'I think I've got it this time.' She gripped the tweezers more tightly.

Twined ribbons of inlaid gold surrounded an intricate frieze of dancing mythological figures. You could see no detail from studying the russet splodges on the lid, but Spanky knew that the ancient gods lay beneath a layer of grime, longing for the chance to shine again. There had been many containers across the centuries for the treasure held inside, but this was the best casket so far. Ten inches by six, and six deep, it sat on the formica-topped desk awaiting inspection, a spectacular relic from a forgotten world. They had removed soil from a tiny gold-rimmed keyhole with a water-pic. The rest of the wrapping

was easier to remove. As it slid away, Amy cautiously wiped a finger across the lid, and the precious figures revealed themselves.

'It's beautiful,' she whispered.

'And we can open it.' Spanky opened the top button of his shirt and removed a slender gold key from around his neck. He could feel his fingers trembling in anticipation. She stared at him, then at the filigreed key. What did he mean?

'I can unlock the casket, Amy.' He could not resist sounding boastful.

'Where did you get that?' She reached up to touch the key, then withdrew her hand, as if wary of being scalded.

'It's been in my possession for many, many years.'

The casket was behind her. She positioned herself before it protectively. 'I don't understand.'

'You don't have to.'

'I can't let you open it.'

'Why not?'

'This is of historical importance. A senior member of staff must be present.'

'Then let's send for Mr Bernardier.' If you don't mind summoning a mud-caked headless corpse, he thought, smiling grimly. The director had never known what hit him. A pity, that. Spanky enjoyed taking credit for his work.

'You know exactly what's inside the box, don't you?'

'Of course I do,' he answered. She was a smart girl. There was no more need for subterfuge now that he was so close to his goal. 'I've always known.'

'Perhaps you'd like to tell me.' She could feel her unease growing by the second. The museum was closed for the night. Only a few of the research departments scattered in the building's cul-de-sac corridors would still be inhabited by lingering personnel.

'All right. Have a seat.' Outside, the warm weather had finally broken and it was starting to rain. 'Listen carefully, and don't question anything I have to say.'

Sensing the danger she was in, Amy dropped to the chair.

'I am not like you. Not — human. I am *Spancialosophus Lacrimosa.* If you find it easier, you can call me Spanky. God had seven fallen angels. Seven daemons. Seven rogue creatures of inspiration and vengeance, banned from Heaven for refusing to worship Man. Damned to a watery limbo existence between Earth and Paradise. Only allowed to visit Earth in the encumbrance of a mortal shell, to be entered upon the invitation of the owner. But I am not like my fellow daemons. I have little of their boundless patience. I am not content to wait for ever, until God, in his infinite wisdom and mercy, sees fit to readmit

us to his Kingdom. And now there is a chance to do more than just return to grace. There is a chance to rule for all eternity. It's all to do with the box.'

Amy snapped around to check that the casket was still there beside her in its nest of wet straw. What if this lunatic tried to snatch it? How would she ever stop him?

'You want to see inside? Take a look.' He unlooped the key from his neck and handed it to her, savouring the moment. 'Do it,' he commanded.

The key was so worn and delicate that she was frightened of breaking it in the lock. To her surprise it turned easily. The lubricant and the water-pic must have loosened the mechanism. And of course, it had been built by Fabergé. With trembling fingers, she raised the lid. The interior was completely dry. Beneath several layers of fine grey silk were—

'Iron rings. Seven of them. One for each of us. The rings of Cain. Forged by Adam's first son. How is your knowledge of the Bible?' He grinned at her, inching closer to the opened casket, holding out his hand for the return of the golden key.

'Let me refresh your memory. Cain was a tiller of the ground, driven from the Earth by God for slaying his brother Abel. Doomed to become a fugitive and a vagabond. Cain tried to atone for his sin by appealing to us, God's other fallen children. He brought us gifts, the rings he forged from the ore beneath his feet. But just as we despised Adam, so we despised his offspring. We refused his offer, and Cain threw the rings back into the earth.

'It took many centuries for us to truly understand the power of the rings. You see, if we had accepted them, we would have been restored to Paradise. That was Cain's gift to us, and we turned it down. It was only by accident that I discovered the truth. But by then, the rings were lost. I've tracked them through time and across the world. Now I've been here too damned long. I can't get back to my home without them. The others won't let me in empty-handed.'

Obviously the man was crazy. Amy knew that the safest solution to her dilemma was to play along until she could find a way to summon help. 'Is that what you want, to be restored to Paradise?' she asked.

'Of course. Wouldn't you?' Spanky drew a step nearer. 'Only this time, we'll have the element of surprise on our side.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, we wish to rule, obviously. God has had everything his way for *far* too long. You have no idea how boring he has made the celestial heavens. We'll change all that. You wait, you'll feel the effects all the way down here. It'll be like having the worst neighbours

in the universe living right overhead.'

'You're mad.' She hadn't meant to say it. The words had just slipped out. He laughed at her.

'If you think what I want is so very illogical, good luck with the rest of the world. A little respect is all anyone wants.'

Amy made a grab for the casket, and was surprised when he made no attempt to stop her. Instead, he watched as she took it from the desk and clutched it protectively across her breasts, smearing mud and pieces of straw on her lab jacket.

'We'd better get going,' he said, checking his watch. 'The others are expecting us.'

'What do you mean?' She looked frantically about for someone to help her. Why was it that the one time she would welcome an interruption, none came?

'Cain protected the rings. They can only be returned to us by a mortal. Lucky you.' He grinned mischievously as he grabbed her hand and pulled her towards the door. 'You get to see where we live. You'll be the first human being ever to meet my brothers and sisters. I'm sure *Spancialosophus Dolorosa* will take a shine to you.'

4. The Denial of Icarus

She pulled back from him. 'Wait, I have to set the alarm system. I'm the last one out.'

'You're lying to me, Amy.' He bared his teeth and yanked her arm hard. 'Don't try to trick me. I can see inside your head.'

They passed from the lab along a corridor, and on to a broad staircase. Miles should have come for her by now, but they passed no one, not even Dr Harold Masters, who was usually making tea in the cubby-hole beside the staircase at this time of the evening.

Spanky's gripping hand felt as though it was burning into her wrist. At the main entrance, the two security guards barely looked up from their desks to wish her goodnight. Couldn't they see that she was in trouble?

The rain sizzled against Spanky's back as he strode across the museum forecourt with her. Amy maintained her grip on the casket, frightened that she would be punished if she tried to fling it away. 'Where are we going?' she gasped, frantically trying to keep up with him.

'To the departure point,' he snapped, barely bothering with her. He crossed Museum Road, half-dragging her upright as she slipped on the wet tarmac. He moved so quickly that she found herself being bodily lifted by him at moments when the traffic seemed about to

crash into them. Onwards they moved, through Holborn and down towards the Embankment.

They were standing in the centre of Waterloo Bridge with the great rain-swollen river sweeping beneath them, broadening out on its way to the sea. 'Why here?' she shouted, the roar of wind and traffic filling her ears.

'I need a good run-up,' he replied. 'Got a tight grip on the casket?'

He checked the box pressed against her sodden breast, then produced an old-fashioned cut-throat razor from his coat and passed it to her with his free hand. 'Hold this. I'm letting go of you for a moment. If you try to escape I will kill you, Amy, I think you know that.' Spanky tore off his jacket and shirt, throwing them out into the Thames.

'I want you to take the razor and run it along my spine.' He pointed to his broad rain-spattered back. 'Do it quickly.' He snapped open the blade for her.

Shaking with cold and fear, she suppressed a shudder of horror as she touched the blade to the point he indicated between his shoulderblades.

'You'll have to push harder than that. Pull it straight down. As deep as you can.'

Wincing, she did as she was told, pushing on the blade and dragging it down. The edge sliced smoothly and cleanly as the skin of his back opened in a widening crimson slit. Spanky was drawing breath in low, guttural gasps, part in pain, part in the pleasure of release from his confinement. As the blade reached his trouser-belt he slapped it from her hand. The razor skittered across the pavement and slid into the gutter. Swathes of blood washed across his back, diluting in the downpour.

Spanky bent forward with an agonised shout and the epidermis split further apart across his back. From within the carapace of skin, two enormous black wings unfolded like opening umbrellas. As the joints clicked and cracked, the membranes between them flexed and stretched and grew. At first she thought they were made of black leather, but now she saw that they were composed of thousands of tiny interlocking black feathers. He seized her hand and climbed on to the balustrade of the bridge, dragging her up on the ledge with him. The fully opened wings spanned a distance of eighteen feet above them.

'Hold on to your hat. Here we go.'

As they launched from the bridge, Amy screamed and howled into the racing clouds above. They swooped down to the scudding grey water, then up and along the path of the river, moving so fast that they outdistanced the falling rain. The pain in her clutched wrist was

excruciating. He turned and brought his face close to hers, shouting as the great black wings beat powerfully above them.

'You have the casket.'

'Yes,' she shouted back as they started to climb, 'I have the casket.'

'Then we can make the crossing.' He pumped his membraneous wings faster, ever faster, so that they flexed and shook from humerus to metacarpal, and it seemed that they were moving beyond the speed of earth and weather and light and time.

Something bright shone in her eyes. She forced herself to look up. Ahead in the clouds, a dazzling area of light had cleared the grey rain to send a Mandelbrot set of fractal colours spiralling down towards them, like pieces of rainbow glass from an exploded kaleidoscope.

'You see it?' he bellowed, 'you see it? That's where we're going. Inside there.'

'No!' she screamed, knowing instinctively that the experience would kill her instantly. This was not a sight for mortal eyes. But they were racing forward at such a velocity that nothing could stop them from reaching the area now. Piercing shards of diamond brilliance enveloped them as they left the Earth behind for ever.

And just as they reached it — it was gone. Slammed shut, vanished, the colours all disappeared, nothing ahead except endless cold grey sky.

Spanky's face was contorted in fury and terror.

'The rings of Cain!' he yelled at the heavens. 'I am returning with the rings!' Already his wings were parting with the impossible velocity, flesh and feathers tearing off in strips, revealing birdlike bloody bones beneath.

With nothing to propel them, their speed slowed. For a moment, it seemed that they were hanging in the air. 'You have the rings,' he screamed at her.

'No, I told you — I have the casket.' The box was still unlocked. She had emptied the rings out as they flew. He had not noticed. With all his energy and concentration centred elsewhere, he had not seen the seven iron bands scatter in the wind and fall back towards the river, and now the doorway home was closed once more.

A sharp crack resounded above them as the great wings bloodily shattered and folded, and with a sickening lurch they dropped back towards the Earth. Spanky's anguished howling filled her tortured ears every metre of the way.

Down and down.

The glutinous silt of the river formed undulations across the expanding estuary at Dartford. It trapped all manner of debris swept out with the heavy ebb tide. It cradled Amy's unconscious body,

rolling her gently against the shore until some kind old souls spotted her, and dragged her out to warmth and safety. Inside Amy's jacket they found an old casket, gripped so tightly that the corners had bruised her flesh.

Spanky's broken form had fallen more heavily and plunged much deeper, to be snagged by the twisted metal on the riverbed. Held firmly in place, Chad Morrison's body undulated against the current. His earthly form was dead, from the fall, from the loss of blood, but the daemon was still alive and imprisoned within. There was nothing Spanky could do but stare out from his blanched shell in endless horror, gripped by his prison of bloating dead flesh, held in turn by the detritus of the river, beneath that great protector of the city.

He was aware of everything, and unable to do anything. He even thought he saw one of the precious rings float by, inches from his eyes. Eventually he allowed his senses to dull and close, lulled to a dreamless sleep by the lunar tides.

Somewhere inside the wide pulsing currents of the sea, the seven rings of Cain tumbled and drifted, lost to man and lost to angels.

'And that is how Karl Fabergé's most magnificent casket, so beautifully restored by Amy Dale, came to be exhibited here at the British Museum,' said Dr Harold Masters, eyeing his bored students as they sprawled and drifted in various states of semi-consciousness about the lecture room like dumped shop mannequins. Honestly, he thought, you try to bring history alive for the young, but you might as well not bloody bother.

* * *

Christopher Fowler has written screenplays for two of his novels, *Spanky* and *Psychoville,* the latter at the request and as a vehicle for the new 'Britpack' stars. His latest novel is *Disturbia,* while earlier books include *Roofworld, Rune* and *Red Bride.* A new collection of stories, *Personal Demons,* was recently published and his next novel will be titled *Sohodevil.* He is also the author of a large graphic novel from DC Comics, *Menz Insanza.* The story featured here reprises the titular demon from one of the aforementioned novels, as the author explains: 'I had wanted to write another Spanky tale for ages. I've had a lot of mail from readers asking for more of the character, but I didn't feel he could really sustain another novel and still keep his originality. I nearly put him in a woman's body, then came up with "Spanky's Back In

Town", sparked off by a stroll along the newly completed Thameside Walk, on which I read an article about the "lost" art of Fabergé. I figured that if Spanky returned, he'd need a damned good reason, and the casket in the tale seemed to provide one. I also wanted to write a story in which he could really make an entrance! It originally centred round Dr Harold Masters of the British Museum, but he has now become a character in my new novel, *Disturbia.* And to answer an often-asked question: the "real" Spanky on the cover of the novel is a gentleman named Fritz Kok(!), and he's a graphic artist/singer currently living in Holland.'

Estate
CAITLÍN R. KIERNAN

Rough and hungry boy, barely nineteen, that first time Silas Desvernine saw the Storm King, laid bright young eyes to raw granite and green rash rising up and up above the river and then lost again in the Hudson morning mist. The craggy skull of the world, he thought, scalped by some Red Indian god and left to bleed, grain by mica grain, and he leaned out past the uncertain rails of the ferryboat's stern, frothy wakes-lash on the dark water and no reflection there. He squinted and there was the railroad's iron scar winding around its base, cross-tie stitches and already the fog was swallowing the mountain, the *A.F. Beach's* restless sidewheel carrying him away, upriver, deeper into the Highlands, towards Newburgh and work in Albany and he opens his leathery old eyelids and it's deadest winter 1941, not that wet May morning in 1889. Old, old man, parchment and twigs, instead of that boy and he's been nodding off again, drifted away and her voice has brought him back. Her voice across the decades, and he wipes away a stringy bit of drool at the corner of his mouth.

'Were you dreaming again?' she asks, soft, velvet tongue from her corner and he blinks, stares up into the emptycold light spilling down through the high windows, stingy, narrow slits in the stone of the long mansard roof. And 'No,' he mumbles, No, knows damn well there's no point to the lie, no hiding himself from her, but at least he's made the effort.

'Yes. You were,' she says, Jesus that voice that's never a moment older than the first time and the words squeeze his tired heart. 'You were dreaming about Storm King, the first time you saw the mountain, the first morning…'

'Please,' no strength in him, begging and she stops, all he knows of mercy. He wishes the sun were warm on his face, warm where it falls in weaktea pools across the clutter of his gallery. Most of his collection here, the better part, gathered around him like the years and the creases in his stubbled face. Dying man's pride, dead-man-to-be obsession, *possessions,* these things he spent a life gathering, stolen or secreted but made his own so they could be no one else's. The things sentenced to float out his little for ever in murky formalin tombs, specimen jars and stoppered bottles, a thousand milky eyes staring nowhere. Glass eyes in taxidermied skulls, bodies stuffed with sawdust; wings and legs spread wide and pinned inside museum cases. Old bones yellowed and wired together in shabby mockeries of life,

older bones gone to silica and varnished, shellacked, fossilized. Plaster and imagination where something might have been lost. Here, the teeth of leviathans, there, the claws of a behemoth; a piece of something fleshy that once fell from the sky over Missouri and kept inside a bell jar. Toads from stones found a mile underground. Sarcophagi and defiled Egyptian nobility ravelling inside, crumbling like him, and a chunk of amber as big as an orange and the carbonized hummingbird trapped inside fifty million years.

A narwhal's ivory tooth bought for half a fortune and he once believed with the unflinching faith of martyrs that it was a unicorn's horn. Precious bit of scaly hide from the Great Sea Serpent, harpooned off Malta in 1807, they said and never mind that he knew it was never anything but the peeling belly of a crocodile.

'There's not much more,' she says, 'A day, perhaps,' and even her urgency, her fear, is patient, wetnurse gentle, but Silas Desvernine closes his eyes again, prays he can slip back, fifty-two trips wrong way round the sun and when he opens them he'll be standing on the deck of the ferry, the damp and chill no match for his young wonder, his anticipation and a strong body and the river rolling slow and deep underneath his feet.

'No,' she says, 'I'm still here, Silas.'

'I know that,' he says and the December wind makes a hard sound around the edges of this rich man's house.

After the War, his father had run, run from defeat and reprisal and grief, from a wasted Confederacy. World broken and there would be no resurrection, no reconstruction. Captain Eustace Desvernine, who'd marched home in '65 to the shallow graves of wife and child, graves scooped from the red Georgia clay with free black hands. And so he faded into the arms of the enemy, trailing behind him the shreds of a life gone to ash and smoke, gone to lead and worms, hiding himself in the gaslight squalor and cobbled industrial sprawl of Manhattan; the first skyscrapers rose around him, and the Union licked its wounds and forgot its dead.

Another marriage, strong Galway girl who gave him another son, Silas Josiah; the last dregs of his fortune into a ferry, the *Alexander Hamilton,* sturdy name that meant nothing to him but he'd seen it painted on the side of a tall building. So, the Captain (as Silas would always remember him, the Captain in shoddy cap and shoddier coat on wide shoulders) carried men and freight from Weehawken to the foot of West 42nd Street. Later, another boat, whitewashed sidewheeler, double-ender he'd named the *A.F. Beach* and the year that Robert E. Lee died, the Captain began running the long route between New York and Albany.

And one night, when Silas was still eighteen years old, almost a man himself and strong, he stood beside his father in the wheelhouse of the *A.F. Beach.* The Captain's face older by the unsteady lamp as they slipped past the lights of West Point on their way downriver. The Captain taking out his old revolving pistol, Confederate-issue Colt, dullshine tarnish and his callused thumb cocking the hammer back while Silas watched, watched the big muzzle pressed against the Captain's left temple. Woman's name across his father's lips then, unfamiliar 'Carrie' burned for ever into Silas' brain like the flash, the echo of the gunshot trapped between the high cliffs, slipping away into the river night and pressed for ever behind his eyes.

'Are you sure that's the way it happened?' she asked him once, when he told her. Years and years ago, not so long after he brought her to his castle on Pollepel Island and she still wore the wings, then, and her eyes still shone new dollar silver from between the narrow bars of her cage.

'I was young,' he said, 'Very young,' and she sighed, short and matter-of-fact sigh that said something but he wasn't certain what.

Whole minutes later, 'Who was she?' and him already turned away, unpacking a crate just arrived from Kathmandu; 'What?' he asked, but already remembering, the meaning of her question and the answer, absently picking a stray bit of excelsior from in his beard and watching those eyes watching him.

'Carrie,' she said. 'Who was Carrie?'

'Oh,' and 'I never found out,' he lied, 'I never tried,' no reason, but already he felt the need to guard those odd details of his confessions, scraps of truth, trifling charms. Hoarding an empty purse, when all the coins have gone to beggars' hands.

'Ah,' she said and Silas looked too quickly back to the things in the crate, pilfered treasures come halfway around the world to him, and it was a long time before he felt her eyes leave him.

Pollepel Island: uneven jut of rock above water where the Hudson gets wide past the Northern Gate, Wey-Gat, the long stony throat of Martyr's Reach, greenscab at the foot of Newburgh Bay; white oak and briar tangle, birch skin over bones of gneiss and granite. Bones of the world laid down a billion years ago and raised again in the splitting of continents, divorce of lands; birth of the Highlands in the time of terrible lizards, then scraped and sculpted raw, made this scape of bald rock and gorge during the chill and fever of ice ages. And Pollepel Island like a footnote to so much time, little scar in this big wound of a place.

Silas Desvernine already a rich man when he first came here.

Already a man who had traded the Captain's ragtag ferries for a clattering empire of steel and sweat, Desvernine Consolidated Shipyard, turning out ironclad steamers, modern ships to carry modern men across the ocean, to carry men to modern war. And Pollepel chosen for his retreat from industry, the sprawling, ordered chaos of the yard, the noise and careless humanity of Manhattan. First glimpse, an engraving, frontispiece by Mr N.P. Willis for *American Scenery:* tall sails and rowboat serenity, Storm King rising in the misty distance. The island recalled from his trips up and down the river and the Captain had shown him where George Washington's soldiers sank their *chevaux-de-frises,* sixty-foot logs carved to spikes and tipped with iron, set into stone caissons and dropped into the river off Pollepel to pierce the hulls of British warships.

And this valley already a valley of castles, self-conscious stately, Millionaire's Row decades before Silas' architects began, before his masons laid the first stones, since the coming of the men of new money, the men who nailed shining locomotive track across the nation or milled steel or dug ore and with their fortunes built fashionable hiding places in the wilderness; cultivated, delusory romance of gentleman farmers in brick and marble, iron spires and garden pools. But Silas Desvernine was never a man of society or fashion, and his reasons for coming to Pollepel Island were his own.

Modest monstrosity, second-hand Gothic borrowed from his memory of something glimpsed on a business trip to Scotland, augmented with the architect's taste for English Tudor, and the pale woman he married, Angeline, his wife, never liked the great and empty halls, the cold and damp that never deserted the rooms. The always-sound of the river and the wind, restless in the too-close trees, the boats passing in the night.

If he'd permitted it, Angeline Desvernine would have named the awful house, given a name to tame it, to bind it, make it her home, maybe, instead of whatever else it was. But *No,* Silas said, stern and husbandly refusal, and so no poet ostentation, no Tioranda or Oulagisket or Glenclyffe on his island, just Silas' castle, Silas' Castle.

His dream, and the long night on the Storm King is never precisely the same twice and never precisely the way things happened. And never anything but the truth. The dream and the truth worn thin, as vellum-soft, streampebble-smooth, these moments pressed between the weight of now and then and everything before, and still as terrible.

Younger but not young, reaching back and she takes his hand, or Angeline takes his hand, neither of them, but an encouraging squeeze for this precarious slow climb up and up, above the river, while Prof

Henry Osborn talks, lectures like the man never has to catch his breath, 'Watch your step there. A lot of loose stone about,' and Silas feels sixty instead of forty-five.

Somewhere near the summit, he lingers, gasping, tearing water eyes and looks down and back, towards his island; a storm coming, on its way up the valley and so twilight settling in early, the day driven like dirty sheep before the thunder-heads, bruisebelly shepherds and the muddy stink of the river on the wind.

'A shame about this weather, though, really,' Osborn sighs. 'On a clear day, you can see the Catskills and the Shawangunks.'

Of course, Osborn wasn't with him that day, this day, and he knows that dimly, dim dream recollection of another history; another climb mixed in with this, the day that Osborn showed him a place where there were broken Iroquois pottery and arrowheads. Osborn, man whose father made a fortune on the Illinois Central and he's never known anything but privilege. The rain begins, then, wet and frying noise, and Henry Osborn squints at the sky, watches it fall as the drops melt his skin away, sugar from skeleton of wrought iron and seam welds; 'On a clear day,' he whispers from dissolving lips, before his jaw falls, clank and coppertooth scatter, and Silas goes on up the mountain alone.

No one ever asked him the *why* of the collecting, except her. Enough whats and wheres and hows, from the very few who came to the island. The short years when Angeline was alive and she held her big, noisy parties, her balls for the rich from other castles down the valley, for gaudy bits of society and celebrity up from New York City or Philadelphia or Boston. Minor royalty once or twice. The curious who came for a peek inside the silent fortress on Pollepel. Long nights when she pretended this house wasn't different, and he let her play the game, to dull the edge of an isolation already eating her alive.

Later, new visitors, after The Great War that left him more than wealthy, no counting anymore, and Angeline in her lonely grave on the western edge of the island, their son gone to Manhattan, the yard run by so many others that Silas rarely left the island. Let whatever of the world he had need of come to him, and never more than one or two at a time, men and women who came to walk his still halls and wonder at this or that oddity. All of them filled with questions, each their own cyclopedia of esoteric interrogations, lean and shadowy catechists, a hundred investigators of the past and future, the hidden corners of this life and the next. Occultists, spiritualists, those whose askings and experiments left them on the bastard edges of science or religion. They came and he traded them glimpses of half-truths for the small and inconsequential things they'd learned elsewhere. All of them

single-minded and they knew, or mostly thought they knew, the why, so no point to ever asking.

That was for her, this one thing he'd brought back to Pollepel that he was afraid of and this one thing he loved beyond words or sanity. The conscious acquisition that could question the collection, the collector.

'I have too much money,' he said once, after the purchase of a plaster replica of Carnegie's *Diplodocus* skeleton to be mounted for the foyer and she asked the sense of it and 'It's a way of getting rid of some of the goddamned money,' he said.

She blinked her owlslow, owlwise blink at him, her gold and crimson eyes scoffing sadly.

'You know the emptiness inside you, Silas. These things are a poor substitute for the things you're missing.' So he'd drawn the draperies on her cage and left them drawn for a week, as long as he could stand to be without the sight of her.

Nineteen eighteen, so almost three years after his son was pulled screaming from his wife's swollen body, pulled wet and blind into the waiting, dogjawed world; helpless thing the raw colour of a burn. His heir and Silas Desvernine could hardly bear the sight of it, the squalling sound of it. Angeline almost dying in the delivery nightmare of blood and sweat, immeasurable hours of breathless pain and there would be no others, the doctor said. Named for father and grandfather's ghost, Eustace Silas, sickly infant that grew stronger slowly, even as its mother's health began to falter, the raising of her child left to indifferent servants; Silas seeing her less and less often, until, finally, she rarely left her room in the east wing.

And one night, late October and the first winter storm rolling down on Pollepel from the mountains, arctic Catskill breath and Silas away in the city. Intending to be back before dark, but the weather so bad and him exhausted after hours with thickheaded engineers, no patience for the train, so the night spent in the warmth and convenience of his apartment near Central Park.

Some dream or night terror and Angeline left her rooms, wandered half-awake, confused, through the sleeping house, no slippers or stockings, bare feet sneakthief soft over Turkish carpets and cold stone, looking for something or someone real. Someone to touch or talk to, someone to bring her back to this world from her clinging nightmares. Something against the storm rubbing itself across the walls and windows, savage snowpelt, wild and wanting in and her alone on the second story: the servants down below, her child and his nurse far away in another part of the house that, at that derelict hour, seemed to weave endlessly back upon itself. Halls as unfamiliar as if

she'd never walked them, doors that opened on rooms she couldn't recall. Strange paintings to watch over her, stranger sights whenever she came to a window to stand staring into the swirling silver night, bare trees and unremembered statuary or hedges. Alien gardens, and all of it so much like the dream, as empty, as hungry; lost in her husband's house and inside herself, Angeline came at last to the mahogany doors to Silas' gallery, wood like old blood and his cabinet beyond, and how many years since she'd come that way? But *this* she recognized, hingecreak and woodsqueal as she stepped across the threshold, the crude design traced into the floor there, design within designs that made her dizzy to look directly at.

'Silas?' and no answer but the storm outside, smothering a dead world. Her so small, so alone at the mouth of this long and cluttered room of glass and dust and careful labels, his grotesquerie, cache of hideous treasures. Everything he loved instead of her; the grey years of hating herself flashing to anger like steam, then, flashing to scalding revelation. Something in her hands, aboriginal weapon or talisman pulled from its bracket on the wall and she swung it in long and ruthless arcs, smashing, breaking, shadow become destroyer. Glass like rain, shatter puddles that sliced at the soles of her feet, splinter and crash and the sicksweet stench of formaldehyde. Angeline imagining gratitude in the blank, green eyes of a two-headed bobcat that tumbled off its pedestal and lay fiercely still, stuffed, mothgnawed, in her path.

And the wail rising up from the depths of her, soul's waters stagnant so long become a tempest to rival the fury and thundervoice of the blizzard. Become a war-cry, dragging her in its red undertow, and when she reached the far side, the high, velvet drapes hiding some final rivalry: tearing at the cloth with her hands, pulling so hard the drapes ripped free of brass rings and slipped like shedding skin to the floor.

Iron bars and at first nothing else, gloom thick as the fog in her head, thick as jam, but nothing more. One step backwards, panting, feeling the damage to her feet, and the subtle shift of light or dark, then, all the nothing coalescing, made solid and beautiful and hateful, hurting eyes that she understood the way she understood her own captivity, her own loneliness.

And the woman with wings and shining bird eyes said her name, *Angeline,* said her name so it meant things she'd never suspected, some way the name held everything she was in three syllables. One long arm out to her, arm too long and thin to believe, skin like moonlight or afterbirth, fingers longer still and pointing to the door of the cage. Padlocked steel and the interlace design from the threshold again, engraved there like a warning; 'Please,' the woman in the cage said,

‘Please, Angeline.’

Angeline Desvernine ran, then, ran from even the possibility of this pleading thing, door slammed shut behind her, closing it away and closing away the fading illusion of her victory. Almost an hour before she found her way back to her own room, trailing pools and crusting smears of blood from her ruined feet; crawling, hands and knees, at the end. She locked her door, and by then the sound of servants awake, distant commotion, her name called again and again, but there was no comfort left after those eyes, the ragged holes they’d put in her. No way not to see them or hear that silk and thorny voice.

Most of the storm’s fury spent by dawn, by the time the maids and cooks and various manservants gave up and called for someone from the stables to take the door off its hinges.

First leadflat light in the empty room, the balcony doors standing open wide and tiny drifts of snow reaching almost to the bed. They found her hanging from the balustrade, noose from curtain cord tiebacks, snow in her tangled black hair, crimson icicles from the sliced flesh of her toes and heels. And her eyes open wide and staring sightless toward the Storm King.

‘They’re my dreams,’ he says, whispers loud, and she says ‘They’re lies,’ and he keeps his eyes on the last colourless smudges of afternoon and says low, mumbled so she won’t hear, ‘Then they’re my lies.’

This time, this dog-eared incarnation of the climb up Storm King and he’s alone, except for the thunder and lightning and rain like wet needles against exposed skin, wind that would take him in its cold fist and fling him, broken, back down to the rocks below, to the impatient, waiting river. No sign anymore of the trail he’s followed from the road, faintest path for deer or whatever else might come this way and now even that’s gone. He can see in the white spaces after the thunder, flashpowder snapshots of the mountain, trees bending and the hulk of Breakneck across the river, Storm King’s twin. Jealous Siamese thing severed by the acid Hudson, and he thinks *No, somewhere deep they’re still connected,* still bound safe by their granite vinculum below the water’s slash and silt.

Thunder that sounds like angels burning and he slips, catches himself, numb hands into the roots of something small that writhes, woodsy revulsion at his touch, and he’s shivering now, the mud and wet straight through his clothes. He lies so still, waiting, to fall, to drown in the gurgling runoff, until the thunder says it’s time to get moving again and he opens his eyes. And he’s standing at the summit, little clearing and the tall stone at its heart like a stake to hold the world in place. Grey megalith like things he’s seen in England or

Denmark or France and in the crackling brief electric flash he can see the marks made in the stone, marks smoothed almost away by time and frost and a hundred thousand storms before. Forgotten characters traced in clean rivulets like emphasis. He would turn and run, from the place and the moment, *If you had it to do over again, If you could take it back,* but the roots have twisted about his wrists, greenstick pythons and for all his clever, distracting variations, there's only this one way it can go.

She steps out of the place where the stone is, brilliant moment, thinnest sliver of an instant caught and held in forked lightning teeth; the rain that beads, rolls off her feathers, each exquisite, roughgem drop and the strange angles of her arms and legs, too many joints. The head that turns on its elegant neck and the eyes that find him, sharp face and molten eyes that will never let him go.

'Nothing from the Pterodactyle, I shouldn't think,' says Professor Osborn, standing somewhere behind him, 'though the cranium is oddly reminiscent of the *Dimorphodon,* isn't it?' and Silas Desvernine bows his head, stares down at the soggy darkness where his feet must be and waits for the leather and satin rustle of her wings, gentle loversound through the storm. The rain catches his tears and washes them away with everything else.

The funeral over and the servants busy downstairs when Silas opened the doors of his gallery; viewed the damage she'd done for the first time, knew it was mostly broken glass and little that couldn't be put right again, but the sight hurt his chest, hurt his eyes. Heart already so broken and eyes already so raw but new pain anyway. No bottom to this pain, and he bent over and picked up his dodo, retrieved it from a bed of diamond shards and Silas brushed the glass from its dusty beak and rump feathers. Set it back on the high shelf between passenger pigeons and three Carolina parakeets. Another step closer to her cage, the drapes still pulled open, and his shoes crunched. Her, crouched in the shadows, wings wrapped tight about her like a cocoon, living shield against him, and he said, 'What did you do to her, Tisiphone?' And surprised at how calm his voice could be, how empty of everything locked inside him and clawing to get out.

The wings shivered, cringed and folded back; 'That's not my name,' she said.

'What did you do to her, Megaera?'

'Shut up,' words spit at the wall where her face was still hidden, at him, 'You know that I'm not one of the three, you've known that all along.'

'She couldn't have hurt you, even if she'd wanted to,' he said, hearing her words but as close as he would ever come to being able to

ignore them: her weak, and his grief too wide to cross even for her voice. ‘Did you think she could hurt you?’ he said.

‘No,’ and shaking her head now, forehead bang and smack against brick and he could see the sticky, black smear she left on the wall.

‘Then you did it to get back at me. Is that it? You thought to hurt me by hurting her.’

‘No,’ she said and that was the only time he ever saw her cry, if it was crying, the dim phosphorescence leaking from the corners of her eyes. ‘No, *no*…’

‘But you know she’s dead, don’t you?’ and ‘Yes,’ she said, small yes too quick and it made him want to wring her white throat, lock his strong hands around her neck and twist until he was rewarded with the pop and cartilage grind of ruined vertebrae. Squeeze until her tongue hung useless from her lipless mouth.

‘She never hurt anyone, Alecto,’ he hissed and she turned around, snake-sudden movement and he took a step away from the bars despite himself.

‘I asked her to *help* me,’ and she was screaming now, perfect, crystal teeth bared. ‘I asked her to free me,’ and her hurt and fury swept over him, blast furnace heat rushing away from her, and faint smell of nutmeg and decay left in the air around his head.

‘I *asked* her to unlock the fucking cage, Silas!’ and the wings slipped from off her back and lay bloody and very still on the unclean metal and hay-strewn floor of the cage.

In the simplest sense, these things, at least, are true: that during the last week of June 1916, Silas Desvernine hired workmen from Haverstraw to excavate a large stone from a spot near the summit of Storm King, and that during this excavation several men died or fell seriously ill, each under circumstances that only seemed unusual if considered in connection with one another. When the foreman resigned (monkeyed little Scotsman with a face like ripe cranberries), Silas hired a second crew and in July the stone was carried down and away from the mountain, ingenious block-and-tackle of his own design, then horse and wagon, and finally, barge, the short distance upriver to Pollepel Island. Moneys were paid to a Mr Harriman of the Palisades Interstate Park Commission, well enough known for his discretion in such matters, and no questions were asked.

And also, that archaeologists and anthropologists, linguists and cryptographers were allowed brief viewings of the artefact over the next year and only the sketchiest, conflicting conclusions regarding the glyphs on the stone were drawn: that they might have been made by Vikings, or Phoenicians, or Minoans, or Atlanteans; that they might be something like Sanskrit, or perhaps the tracks of prehistoric sea

worms, or have been etched by Silas Desvernine himself. The suggestion by a geologist of no particular note, that the stone itself, oily black shale with cream flecks of calcite, was not even native to the region, was summarily ignored by everyone but Silas. Who ignored nothing.

One passing footnote mention of 'the Butterhill Stone' in a monograph on Mahican pottery and by 1918 it was forgotten by the busy, forgetful world of men and words beyond the safeguarding walls of Silas' Castle.

'Wake up,' she says. 'You must wake up,' and he does, gummy blink, unfocused, and the room's dark except for the light of brass lamps with stained glass shades like willows and dragon-flies and drooping, purple wisteria.

'You're dying, Silas,' and he squints towards the great cage, cage that could hold lions or leopards and she looks so terribly small in there. Deceptive contrast of iron and white, white skin, and she says, 'Before the sun rises again. '

Big sigh rattle from his bony chest and 'No,' looking about the desk for his spectacles. 'No, not yet,' but she says 'You're an old man, Silas, and old men die, eventually. All of them.'

'Not yet,' and there they are, his bifocals perched on a thick book about African beetles, 'there's a new war, new ships that have to be built,' and he slips them on, frame wire bent and straightened and bent again so they won't sit quite right on his face any longer. Walking cane within reach, but he doesn't stand, waits for the murky room to become solid again.

'Let me go now,' she says, as if she hasn't said it a thousand thousand times before, as if it were a new idea, never occurred to her before and he laughs. Froggy little strangled sound more like a burp. 'You're trying to trick me,' he says, grins his false-toothed grin at her and one crooked finger pointed so there can be no doubt. 'You're not a sibyl,' and it takes him five minutes to remember where he's put his pocket watch.

'I can hear your tired old heart and it's winding down, like your watch,' and there it is, in his vest pocket; 4:19, but the hour hand and minute hand and splinter second hand still as ice. He forgets to wind it a lot these days, and how much time has he lost, dozing at his desk? Stiff neck crane and he can see stars through the high windows.

'You can't leave me here, Silas.'

'Haven't I *told* you that I won't?' still watching the stars, dim glimpse of Canes Venatici or part of the Little Bear, and the anger in his voice surprising him. 'Haven't I said that? That I'll let you go before I die?'

‘You’re a liar, Silas Desvernine. You’ll leave me here with all these other things that you’ve stolen,’ and he notices that her eyes have settled on the tall glass case near her cage, four tall panes and the supporting metal rods inside, the shrivelled, leathery things wired there. The dead feathers that have come loose and lie scattered like October leaves at the bottom of the case.

‘You would have destroyed them if I hadn’t put them there,’ he mumbles, ‘Don’t tell me that’s not the truth,’ turning away, anything now to occupy his attention, and it was true, that part. That she’d tried to eat them after they’d fallen off, *Jesus Christ,* tried to *eat* them, before he took them away from her, still warm and oozing blood from their ragged stumps.

‘Please,’ she whispers, softest, snowflake excuse for sound, and ‘Please, Silas,’ as he opens a book, yellowbrown paper to crackle loud between his fingers, and adjusts his bent spectacles.

‘I keep my promises,’ grumbled, and he turns a dry page.

* * *

Caitlin R. Kiernan’s Gothic and Goth-noir short stories have appeared in a number of anthologies, including The Sandman Book of Dreams, Love in Vein II, Lethal Kisses, Darkside: Horror for the Next Millennium, Noirotica 2, Brothers of the Night and the previous volume of Dark Terrors. Her first novel, Silk, is due from Penguin/RoC. She made her comics-writing debut in DC Comics’ The Dreaming, for whom she now writes fall-time. As for the background to her story in this volume, the author recalls: ‘In part “Estate” grew out of a drive with Christa Faust and her father along the Hudson River Valley on a misty, cold afternoon in February 1996, although we didn’t make it as far upriver as Storm King or Pollepel Island. And I’d been reading a lot of Charles Fort and Edward Gorey, and suffered a recent obsession with the great American industrialists. I suspect it will be the first in the long story cycle to be collected as Tales of Pain and Wonder. “Estate” was written to Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds’ Murder Ballads and to Black Tape for a Blue Girl.’

Walking Wounded
MICHAEL MARSHALL SMITH

When after two days the discomfort in his side had not stopped, merely mutated, Richard began to get mildly concerned. It didn't hurt as often as it had at first, and he could make a wider range of movements without triggering it; but when the pain did come it was somehow deeper, as if settled into the bone.

Christine's answer to the problem was straightforward, and strident in its logic and delivery. He should go to Casualty, or at the very least to the doctor's surgery which was just opposite their new flat in Kingsley Road. Richard's view, though unspoken, was just as definite: bollocks to that. There were more than enough dull post-move tasks to be endured without traipsing up to the Royal Free and sitting with stoic old women and bleeding youths in a purgatory of peeling linoleum. As they were now condemned to living on a different branch of the Northern line to Hampstead, it would require two dogleg trips down to Camden and back out again — together with a potentially limitless spell on a waiting-room bench — and burn up a whole afternoon. Even less appealing, for some reason, was the prospect of going just across the road and explaining in front of an audience of whey-faced locals that he had been living somewhere else, now lived just across the road, and wished to both register with the doctor and have his apathetic opinion on a rather unspecific pain in Richard's side. And that he was very sorry for being middle-class and would they please not beat him up.

He couldn't be bothered, in other words, and instead decided to dedicate Monday to taking a wide variety of objects out of cardboard boxes and trying to work out where they could be least unattractively placed. Christine had gone back to work, at least, which meant she couldn't see his occasional winces or hear the swearing which greeted every new object for which there simply wasn't room.

The weekend had been hell, and not just because Richard hadn't wanted to move in the first place. Or rather he had, in one way; he had believed that they *should* move, instead of actually wanting to. It had come to him one night lying in bed in the flat in Belsize Park, listening to the even cadence of Chris's breathing and wondering at what point in the last couple of months they had stopped falling asleep together. At first they'd drifted off simultaneously, facing each other, four hands clasped into a declaration, determined not to leave each other even for the hours they spent in another realm. Richard half-remembered a poem by someone long dead — Herrick,

possibly? — the gist of which had been that though we all inhabit the same place during the day, at night each one is hurled into a several world. Well it hadn't been that way with them, not at first. Yet after nine months there he was, lying awake, happy to be in the same bed as Chris but wondering where she was.

Eventually he'd got up and wandered through into the sitting-room. In the half-light it looked the same as it always had. You couldn't see which pictures had been taken down, which objects had been removed from shelves and hidden in boxes at the bottom of cupboards. You couldn't tell that for three years he had lived there with someone else.

But Richard knew that he had, and so did Christine. As he gazed out over the garden in which Susan's attempts at horticulture still struggled for life in the face of their joint indifference, Richard finally realized that they should move. Understood, suddenly and with cold guilt, that Chris probably didn't like living here. It was a lovely flat, with huge rooms and high ceilings. It was on Belsize Avenue, which meant not only was it within three minutes' walk of Haverstock Hill, with its cafés, stores and Tube station, but Belsize 'village' was just around the corner. A small enclave of shops specifically designed to cater to the needs of the local well-heeled, the village was so comprehensively stocked with pâtés, wine, videos and magazines that you hardly ever actually needed to go up to Hampstead, itself only a pleasant ten minutes' walk away. The view from the front of the flat itself was on to the Avenue, wide and spaced with ancient trees. The back was on to a garden neatly bordered by an old brick wall, and although only a few plants grew with any real enthusiasm the general effect was still pleasing.

But the view through Christine's eyes was probably different. She perhaps saw the local pubs and restaurants in which Richard and Susan had spent years of happy evenings. She maybe felt the tightness with which her predecessor had held Richard's hand as they walked down to the village, past the gnarled mulberry tree which was the sole survivor of the garden of a country house which had originally stood there. She certainly wondered which particular patches of carpet within the flat had provided arenas for cheerful, drunken sex. This had come out one night after they had come back from an unsuccessful dinner party at one of Chris's friends, both rather drunk and irritable. Richard had been bored enough by the evening to respond angrily to the question, and the matter had been dropped. Standing there in the middle of the night, staring around a room stripped of its familiarity by darkness, he remembered the conversation, the nearest thing they'd yet had to a full-blown argument. For a moment he saw the flat as she probably did, and almost believed he could hear the rustling of

gifts from another woman, condemned to storage but stirring in their boxes, remembering the places where they had once stood.

The next morning, over *cappuccinos* on Haverstock Hill, he'd suggested they move. At the eagerness of her response he felt a band loosen in his chest that he hadn't even realized was there, and the rest of the day was wonderful.

Not so the move. Three years' worth of flotsam, fifty boxes full of stuff. Possessions and belongings which he'd believed were individual objects metamorphosed into generic shite which had to be manhandled and sorted through. The flat they'd finally found to move into was tiny. Well, not tiny; the living room and kitchen were big enough, and there was a roof garden. But a good deal smaller than Belsize Avenue, and nearly twenty boxes of Richard's stuff had to go into storage. Books which he seldom looked at, but would have preferred to have around; videos which he didn't want to watch next week, but might in a couple of months; old clothes which he never wore but which had too much sentimental value to be thrown away. And, of course, the Susan collection. Objects in boxes, rounded up and buried deeper by putting in further boxes, then sent off to be hidden in some warehouse in Kings Cross. At a cost of fifteen pounds a week this was going to make living in the new flat even more expensive than the old one — despite the fact it was in Kentish Town and you couldn't buy chicken liver and hazelnut pâté for love or money.

On Friday night the two of them huddled baffled and alone in the huge living room in Belsize Avenue, surrounded by mountains of cardboard. They drank cups of coffee and tried to watch television, but it was as if the flat had already taken its leave of them. When they went to bed it was if they were lying on a cold hillside in a country where their visa had expired.

The next morning two affable Australians arrived with a van the size of Denmark, and Richard watched, vicariously exhausted, as they trotted up and down the stairs, taking his life away. Chris bristled with female cleaning know-how in the kitchen, periodically sweeping past him with a damp cloth in her hand, humming to herself. As the final pieces of furniture were dragged away Richard tried to say goodbye to the flat, but the walls stared back at him with vacant indifference, and offered nothing more than dust in corners which had previously always been hidden. Dust, some particles of which were probably Susan's skin — and his and Chris's, of course. He left to the sound of a Hoover, and followed the van to their new home.

Where, it transpired, his main bookcase could not be taken up the stairs. The two Australians, by now rather bedraggled and hot, struggled gamely in the dying light but eventually had to confess themselves beaten. Richard, by now rather depressed, allowed them to

put the bookcase back in the van, to be taken off with the other storage items. Much later he held out a tenner to each of them, watched the van squeeze off down the narrow road, and then turned and walked into his new home.

Chris was still at Belsize Avenue, putting the finishing touches to the cleaning and negotiating with the old twonk who owned the place. While he waited for her to arrive, Richard moved a few boxes around, not wanting to do anything significant before Chris was there to share it with him, but too tired to simply sit still. The lower hallway was almost completely impassable, and he resolved to carry a couple of boxes up to the living room. It was while he was struggling up the stairs with one of them that he hurt himself.

He was about halfway up, panting under a box which seemed to weigh more than the house itself, when he slipped on a cushion lying on the stairs. Muscles which he hadn't used since his athletic glory days at school kicked into action, and he managed to avoid falling but collided heavily with the wall instead. The corner of the box he was carrying crunched solidly into his ribs. For a moment the pain was startling, and a small voice in his head said, 'Well, that's done it.'

He let the box slide to the floor and stood panting for a while, fingers tentatively feeling for what he was sure must be at least one broken rib. He couldn't find anything which gave more than usual, and after a recuperative cigarette carefully pushed the box the rest of the way up the stairs. Half an hour later Chris arrived, happily cross about their old landlord's attempts to whittle money off their deposit, and set to work on the kitchen.

They fell asleep together that night, three of their hands together; one of Richard's unconsciously guarding his side.

The next morning it hurt like hell, but as a fully-fledged male Richard knew how to deal with this: he ignored it. After four days of looking at the cardboard boxes cheerfully emblazoned with the logo of the removal firm, he had begun to hate the sight of them, and concentrated first on unpacking everything so he could be rid of them. In the morning he worked in the living room, listening to the sound of Chris whistling in the kitchen and bathroom, those female domains. He discovered that two of the boxes shouldn't even have been there at all, but were supposed to have been taken with the others and put in storage. One was full of computer manuals for software he either never used or knew back to front; the other was a box of Susan Objects. As he opened it, Richard realized why it had hurt quite so much when making contact with his ribs: it contained, amongst other things, a heavy and angular bronze which she had made and presented to him. He was lucky it hadn't impaled him.

As it wasn't worth calling the removal men out to collect the boxes, they both ended up in his microscopic study, squatting on top of the filing cabinet. More precious space taken up by stuff which shouldn't even be there; either in the flat or in his life.

The rest of the weekend disappeared into a blur of tidal movement and pizza. Objects migrated from room to room, in smaller and slower circles, until they finally found their new nesting places. Chris efficiently unpacked all the clothes and put them in the fitted wardrobes, cooing over the increase in hanging space. Richard tried to organize his books into his *decreased* shelving space, eventually having to lay many of them on their side and pile them up vertically. He set his desk and computer up, and checked his e-mail, obscurely irritated to find that no one had tried to contact him in the couple of days he'd been off-line.

By Monday most of it was done, and Richard spent the morning trying to turn his study into a habitable room by clearing the few remaining boxes. At eleven Chris called from work, cheerful and full of vim, and he was glad to sense that the move had made her happy. As they were chatting he realized that he must at some point have scraped his left hand, because there were a series of shallow scratches, like paper cuts, over the palm and underside of the fingers. They hardly seemed significant against the pain in his side, and aside from washing his hands when the conversation was over, he ignored them.

In the afternoon he took a break and walked down to the local corner store for some cigarettes. It was only his second visit, but he knew he'd already seen all it had to offer. The equivalent store in Belsize Village had stocked American magazines, fresh-baked bread and three different types of pesto. Next door had been a delicatessen with home-made duck's liver and port pâté to die for. 'Raj's EZShop' sold none of these things, and instead concentrated rather single-mindedly on the pot noodle and toilet roll end of the market. When he left the shop Richard went and peered dispiritedly at the grubby menu hanging in the window of the restaurant opposite. Eritrean food, whatever the hell that was. One of the dishes was described as 'three pieces of cooked meat', which seemed both strangely specific and uncomfortingly vague.

Huddling into his jacket against the cold, Richard turned and walked for home, feeling — he imagined — rather like a deposed Russian aristocrat, allowed to live after the revolution but condemned to lack everything which he had once held dear. The sight of a small white dog scuttling by seemed only to underline his isolation.

When Chris returned at six she couldn't understand his quietness, and he didn't have the heart to try to explain it to her.

‘What’s that?’

The answer, Richard saw, appeared to be that it was a scratch. About four inches long, it ran across his chest directly over his heart. He hadn’t noticed it before, but it seemed to have healed and thus must have been there for a day or two.

‘Another souvenir from the move,’ he said. It was after midnight and they were lying in bed, having just abandoned an attempt to make love. It wasn’t that there was any lack of enthusiasm — far from it — simply that the pain in Richard’s ribs was a bit too bracing to ignore. He was fine so long as he kept his chest facing directly forwards, but any twisting and it felt as if someone was stoving in his rib cage with a well-aimed boot. ‘And no, I’m not going to the doctor about it.’

Chris smiled, started to tickle him, and then realized she shouldn’t. Instead she sighed theatrically and kissed him on the nose before turning to lie on her side.

‘You’d better get well soon,’ she said, ‘Or I’m going to have to buy a do-it-yourself book.’

‘You’ll go blind,’ he said, turning off the bedside light, and she giggled quietly in the dark. He rolled gingerly so that he was snuggled into her back, and lightly stroked her shoulder, waiting for sleep. After a moment he noticed a wetness under his hand, and stopped, pulling his hand out from under the duvet. In the threadbare moonlight he confirmed what he’d already suspected. Earlier in the evening he’d noticed that the little cuts seemed to be exuding tiny amounts of blood. It was still happening. Constantly being reopened when he lugged boxes around, presumably.

‘S’nice,’ Chris murmured sleepily. ‘Don’t stop.’

Richard slid his hand back under the duvet and moved it gently against her shoulder again, using the back of his fingers and cupping his palm away from her.

The bathroom, though tiny, was very adequately equipped with mirrors, and Richard couldn’t help noticing the change as soon as he took off his dressing gown the next morning.

There was still no sign of bruising over his ribs, which worried him. Something which hurt as much as that ought to have an external manifestation, he thought, unless it indicated internal damage. The pain was a little different this morning, less like a kicking, more as if two of the ribs were moving tightly against each other, a kind of cartilaginous twisting.

There were, however, a number of new scratches. Mostly short, they were primarily congregated over his stomach and chest. It looked as though a cat with its claws out had run over him in the night. As

they didn't have a cat that seemed unlikely, and Richard frowned as he regarded himself in the mirror.

Also odd was the mark on his chest. Perhaps it was just seeing it in proper light, but this morning it looked rather more than just a scratch. By spreading his fingers out on either side Richard found he could pull the cut slightly apart, and that it was a millimetre or so deep. When he allowed it to close again it did so with a faint liquidity, the sides tacky with lymph. It wasn't healing properly. In fact — and Richard held up his left hand to confirm this — it was doing the same as the cuts on his palm. They too seemed as fresh as the day before — if not a little fresher.

Glad that Chris had left the house before he'd made it out of bed, Richard quickly showered, patting himself dry around the cuts, and covered them with clothes.

By lunchtime the flat was finally in order, and Richard had to admit that parts of it looked pretty good. The kitchen was the one room which was bigger than he'd been used to, and with the late morning light slanting into it, was very attractive. The table was a little larger than would have been ideal, but at least you could get at the fridge without performing contortions. The living-room upstairs also looked pretty bijou, if you ignored the way in which his books were crammed into the bookcases. Chris had already established a nest on the larger of the two sofas; her book, ashtray and an empty coffee mug placed within easy reach. Richard perched on the other sofa for a while, eyes vaguely running over his books and realizing he ought to make an effort to colonize a corner of the room for his own.

Human, All Too Human.

The title brought Richard out of his reverie. A secondhand volume of Nietzsche, bought for him as a joke by Susan. It shouldn't have been on the shelf, but in one of the storage boxes. Chris didn't know it had been a present, but then it hadn't been Chris who'd insisted he take the other stuff down. It had simply seemed to be the right thing to do, and Richard had methodically worked around the old flat hiding things the day before Chris moved in. Hiding them from whom, he hadn't been sure. It had been six months since he and Susan had split up, and she wasn't even seeing the man she'd left him for any more. To have the old mementoes still out didn't cause him any pain, and he'd thought he'd put them away purely out of consideration for Chris.

But as he looked over the bookcase he realized how much the book of Nietzsche stood out in their new flat. It smelled of Susan. Some tiny part of her, some speck of skin or smear of oil, must surely still be on it somewhere. If he could sense that, then surely Chris could as well. He walked across the room, took the book from the

shelf, and walked downstairs to put it in the box on top of his filing cabinet in the study.

On the way he diverted into the bathroom. As he absently opened his fly, he noticed an unexpected sensation at his fingertips. He brushed them around inside his trousers again, trying to work out what he'd felt. Then he slowly removed them, and held his hand up.

His fingers were spotted with blood.

Richard stared coldly at them for a while, and then calmly undid the button of his trousers. Carefully he lowered them, and then pushed down his boxer shorts.

More cuts.

A long red line ran from the middle of his right thigh around to within a couple of inches of his testicles. A similar one lay across the very bottom of his stomach. A much shorter but slightly deeper slit lay across the base of his penis, and it was from this that the majority of the blood was flowing. It wasn't a bad cut, and hardly put one in mind of the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre,* but Richard would have much preferred it not to have been there.

Looking up at the mirror above the toilet, he reached up and undid the buttons on his shirt. The scratches on his stomach now looked more like cuts, and a small thin line of blood rolled down from the cut on his chest.

Like many people, Richard wasn't fond of doctors. It wasn't so much the sepulchral gloom of waiting rooms he minded, or the grim pleasure their receptionists took in patronizing you. It was mainly the boredom and the sense of potential catastrophe, combined with a knowledge that there wasn't a great deal they could do. If you had something really bad, they sent you to a hospital. If it was trivial, chances were it would go away of its own accord. It was partly for these reasons that Richard simply did his shirt and trousers back up again, after patting at some of the cuts with pieces of toilet paper. It was partly also because he was afraid. He didn't know where the scratches were coming from, but the fact that, far from healing, they seemed to be getting worse, was worrying. With his vague semi-understanding of such things he wondered if it meant his blood had stopped clotting, and if so, what that meant. He didn't think you could suddenly develop haemophilia. It didn't seem very likely. But what then? Perhaps he was tired, run-down after the move, and that was making a difference.

In the end he resolved to just go on ignoring it a little longer, like a mole which keeps growing but which you don't wish to believe might be malignant. He spent the afternoon sitting carefully at his desk, trying to work and resisting the urge to peek at parts of his body. It was almost certainly his imagination, he believed, which

made it feel as if a warm, plump drop of blood had sweated from the cut on his chest and rolled slowly down beneath his shirt; and the dampness he felt around his crotch was the result of his having turned the heating up high.

Absolutely.

He took care to shower well before Chris was due home. The cuts were still there, and had been joined by another on his upper arm. When he was dry he took some surgical dressing and micropore tape from the bathroom cabinet and covered the ones which were bleeding most. He then chose his darkest shirt from the wardrobe and sat in the kitchen, waiting for Chris to come home. He would have gone upstairs, but didn't really feel comfortable up there by himself yet. Although most of the objects in the room were his, Chris had arranged them, and the room seemed a little forlorn without her to provide their underlying structure.

That evening they went out to a pub in Soho, a birthday drink for one of Chris's mates. Chris had several different groups of friends, Richard had discovered. He had also discovered that the ones she regarded as her closest were the ones he loathed the most. It wasn't because of anything intrinsically unpleasant about them, more their insufferable air of having known each other since before the dawn of time, like some heroic group of Knights of the Pine Table. Unless you could remember the hilarious occasion when they all went down to the Dangling Cock in Mulchester and good old 'Kipper' Philips sang 'Bohemian Rhapsody' straight through while lying on the bar with a pint on his head before going on to amusingly prang his father's car on the steps of the village church, you were clearly no more than one of life's spear carriers — even after you'd been going out with one of them for nearly a year. In their terms, God was a bit of a Johnny-come-lately, and the Devil, had he turned up with a card and a present, would have been treated with the cloying indulgence reserved for friends' younger siblings.

Luckily that evening they were seeing a different and more recent group, some of whom were certified human beings. Richard stood at the bar affably enough, slowly downing a long series of Kronenbourgs while Chris alternately went to talk to people or brought them to talk to him. One of the latter, a doctor whom Richard believed to be called Kate, peered hard at him as soon as she hove into view.

'What's that?' she asked, bluntly.

Richard was about to tell her that what he was holding was called a cigarette, that it consisted of the dried and rolled leaves of the tobacco plant, and that he had every intention — regardless of any objections she or anyone else might have — of sticking it in his mouth

and lighting it, when he realized she was looking at his left hand. Too late, he tried to slip it into his pocket, but she reached out and snatched it up.

'Been in a fight, have you?' she asked. Behind her Chris turned from the man she was talking to and looked over Kate's shoulder at Richard's hand.

'No,' he said. 'Just a bizarre moving accident.'

'Hmm,' Kate said, her mouth pursed into a small moue of consideration. 'Looks like someone's come at you with a knife, if you ask me.'

Chris looked up at Richard, eyes wide, and he groaned inwardly.

'Well, things between Chris and I haven't been so good lately. ' he tried, and got a laugh from both of them. Kate wasn't to be deflected, however.

'I'm serious,' she said, holding up her own hand to demonstrate. 'Someone tries to kill you with a knife, what do you do? You hold your hands up. And what happens is often the blade will nick the defending hands a couple of times before the knife gets through. See it all the time in Casualty. Little cuts, just like those.'

Richard pretended to examine the cuts on his hand, and shrugged.

'Maybe Kate could look at your ribs,' Chris said.

'I'm sure there's nothing she'd like better,' he said. 'After a hard day at the coal face there's probably nothing she'd like more than to look at another piece of coal.'

'What's wrong with your ribs?' Kate asked, squinting at him closely.

'Nothing,' he said. 'Just banged them.'

'Does this hurt?' she asked, and suddenly cuffed him around the back of the head.

'No,' he said, laughing.

'Then you're probably all right,' she winked, and disappeared to get a drink. Chris frowned for a moment, caught between irritation at not having got to the bottom of his rib problem and happiness at seeing him get on with one of her friends. Just then a fresh influx of people arrived at the door and Richard was saved from having to watch her choose which emotion to go with.

Mid-evening he went to the gents and shut himself into one of the cubicles. He changed the dressings on his penis and chest, and noted that some of the cuts on his stomach were now slick with blood. He didn't have enough micropore to dress them, and realized he would just have to hope that they stayed manageable until he got home. The cuts on his hands didn't seem to be getting any deeper.

Obviously they were just nicks. Almost, as Kate had said, as if

someone had come at him with a knife.

They got home well after midnight. Chris was more drunk than Richard, but he didn't mind. She was the only woman he'd ever met who got even cuter when she was plastered, instead of maudlin or argumentative.

Chris staggered straight into the bathroom, to do whatever the hell it was she spent hours in there doing. Richard made his way into the study to check the answerphone, banging into walls whose positions he still hadn't really internalized.

One message.

Sitting heavily down on his chair, Richard pressed the play button. Without noticing he was doing it, he reached forward and turned down the volume so only he would hear what was on the tape. A habit born of the first weeks of his relationship with Chris, when Susan was still calling fairly regularly. Her messages, though generally short and uncontroversial, were not things he wanted Chris to hear. Again, a programme of protection, now no longer needed. Feeling self-righteous, and burping gently, Richard turned the volume back up.

He almost jumped out of his skin when he realized the message actually was from Susan, and quickly turned the volume back down. She said hello, in the diffident way she had, and went on to observe that they hadn't seen each other that year yet. There was no reproach, simply a statement of fact. She asked him to call her soon, to arrange a drink.

The message had just finished when Chris caroomed out of the bathroom smelling of toothpaste and moisturizer.

"ny messages?'

'Just a wrong number,' he said.

She shook her head slightly, apparently to clear it rather than in negation. 'Coming to bed then?' she asked, slyly. Waggling her eyebrows, she performed a slow grind with her pelvis, managing both not to fall over and not to look silly, which was a hell of a trick. Richard made his 'Sex life in ancient Rome' face, inspired by a book he'd read as a child.

'Too right,' he said. 'Be there in a minute.'

But he stayed in the study for a quarter of an hour, long enough to ensure that Chris would have passed out. Wearing pyjamas for the first time in ten years, he slipped quietly in beside her and waited for the morning.

The bedroom seemed very small as he lay there, and whereas in Belsize Park the moonlight had sliced in, casting attractive shadows on the wall, in Kingsley Road the only visitors in the night were the curdled orange of a streetlight outside and the sound of a siren in the

distance.

As soon as Chris had dragged herself groaning out of the house, Richard got up and went through to the bathroom. He knew before he took his night clothes off what he was going to find. He could feel parts of the pyjama top sticking to areas on his chest and stomach, and his crotch felt warm and wet.

The marks on his stomach now looked like proper cuts, and the gash on his chest had opened still further. His penis was covered in dark blood, and the gashes around it were nasty. He looked as if he had collided with a threshing machine. His ribs still hurt a great deal, though the pain seemed to be constricting, concentrating around a specific point rather than applying to the whole of his side.

He stood there for ten minutes, staring at himself in the mirror. So much damage. As he watched he saw a faint line slowly draw itself down three inches of his forearm; a thin raised scab. He knew that by the end of the day it would have reverted into a cut.

Mid morning he called Susan at her office number. As always he was surprised by how official she sounded when he spoke to her there. She had always been languid of voice, in complete contrast to her physical and emotional vivacity — but when you talked to her at work she sounded like a headmistress.

Her tone mellowed when she realized who it was. She tried to pin him down to a date for a drink, but he avoided the issue. They'd seen each other twice since she'd left him for John Ayer; once while he'd been living with Chris. Chris had been very relaxed about the meetings, but Richard hadn't. On both occasions he and Susan had spent a good deal of time talking about Ayer; the first time focusing on why Susan had left Richard for him, the second on how unhappy she was about the fact that Ayer had in turn left her without even saying goodbye. Either she hadn't realized how much the conversations would hurt Richard, or she hadn't even thought about it. Most likely she had just taken comfort from talking to him in the way she always had.

'You're avoiding it, aren't you,' Susan said, eventually.

'What?'

'Naming a day. Why?'

'I'm not,' he protested, feebly. 'Just, busy, you know. I don't want to say a date and then have to cancel.'

'I really want to see you,' she said. 'I miss you.'

Don't say that, thought Richard miserably. Please don't say that.

'And there's something else,' she added. 'It was a year today when. '

'When what?' Richard asked, confused. They'd split up about

eighteen months ago.

Susan took an audibly deep breath. ‘The last time I saw John,’ she said, and finally Richard understood.

That afternoon he took a walk to kill time, trolling up and down the surrounding streets, trying to find something to like. He discovered another corner store nearby, but it didn’t stock Parma ham either. Little dusty bags of fuses hung behind the counter, and the plastic strips of the cold cabinet were completely opaque. A little further afield he found a local video store, but he’d seen every thriller they had, most of them more than once. The storekeeper seemed to stare at him as he left, as if wondering what he was doing there.

After a while he simply walked, not looking for anything. Slab-faced fat women clumped by, screaming at children already getting into method for their five minutes of fame on *CrimeWatch UK*. Pipe-cleaner men stalked the streets in brown trousers and zip-up jackets, heads fizzing with racing results. The pavements seemed unnaturally grey, as if waiting for a second coat of reality, and hard green leaves spiralled down to join brown ashes already fallen.

And yet as he started to head back towards Kingsley Road he noticed a small dog standing on a corner, different to the one he’d seen before. White with a black head and lolling tongue, the dog stood still and looked at him, big brown eyes rolling with good humour. It didn’t bark, but merely panted, ready to play some game he didn’t know.

Richard stared at the dog, suddenly sensing that some other life was possible here, that he was occluding something from himself. The dog skittered on the spot slightly, keeping his eyes on Richard, and then abruptly sat down. Ready to wait. Ready to still be there.

Richard looked at him a little longer and then set off for the Tube station. He used the public phone there to leave a message at Kingsley Road, telling Chris he’d gone out unexpectedly and might be back late.

At eleven he left the George and walked down Belsize Avenue. He didn’t know how important the precise time was, and he couldn’t actually remember it, but it felt right. Earlier in the evening he had walked past the old flat, establishing that the ‘For Let’ sign was still outside. Probably the landlord had jacked the rent up so high he couldn’t find any takers.

During the hours he had spent in the pub he had checked the cuts only twice. Then he had ignored them, his only concession being to roll the sleeve of his shirt down to hide what was now a deep gash on his forearm. When he looked at himself in the mirror of the gents his

face seemed pale; whether from the lighting or blood loss he didn't know. As he could now push his fingers deep enough into the slash on his chest to feel his sternum he suspected it was probably the latter. When he used the toilet he did so with his eyes closed. He didn't want to know what it looked like down there: the sensation of his fingers on ragged and sliced flesh was more than enough. The pain in his side had continued to condense, and was now restricted to a rough circle four inches in diameter.

It was time to go.

He slowed as he approached the flat, trying to time it so that he drew outside when there was no one else in sight. As he waited he marvelled quietly at how different the sounds were to those in Kentish Town. There was no shouting, no roar of maniac traffic or young bloods looking for damage. All you could hear was distant laughter, the sound of people having dinner, braving the cold and sitting outside Café Pasta or the Pizza Express. This area was different, and it wasn't his home any more. As he realized that, it was with relief. It was time to say goodbye.

When the street was empty he walked quietly along the side of the building to the wall. Only about six feet tall, it held a gate through to the garden. Both sets of keys had been yielded, but Richard knew from experience that he could climb over. More than once he or Susan had forgotten their keys on the way out to get drunk and he'd had to let them back in this way.

He jumped up, arms extended, and grabbed the top of the wall. His side tore at him, but he ignored it and scrabbled up. Without pausing he slid over the top and dropped silently on to the other side, leaving a few slithers of blood behind. The window to the kitchen was there in the wall, dark and cold. Chris had left a dishcloth neatly folded over the tap in the sink. Other than that the room looked as if it had been moulded in an alien's mind. Richard turned away and walked out into the garden.

He limped towards the centre, trying to recall how it had gone. In some ways he could remember everything; in others it was as if it had never happened to him, was just a secondhand tale told by someone else. A phone call to an office number he'd copied from Susan's filofax before she left. An agreement to meet for a drink, on a night Richard knew she'd be out of town. Two men, meeting to sort things out in a gentlemanly fashion.

The stalks of Susan's abandoned plants nodded suddenly in a faint breeze, and an eddy of leaves chased each other slowly around the walls. Richard glanced towards the living-room window. Inside it was empty, a couple of pieces of furniture stark against walls painted with dark triangular shadows. It was too dark to see, and he was too far

away, but he knew the dust was gone. Even that little part had been sucked up and buried away.

He felt a strange sensation on his forearm, and looked down in time to see the gash there disappearing, from bottom to top, from finish to start. It went quickly, as quickly as it had been made. He turned to look at the verdant patch of grass, expecting to see it move, but it was still. Then he felt a warm sensation in his crotch, and realized it too would soon be whole. He had hacked at him there long after he knew Ayer was dead; hacked symbolically and pointlessly until the penis which had rootled and snuffled into Susan had been reduced to a scrap of offal.

The leaves moved again, faster, and the garden grew darker as if some huge cloud had moved into position overhead. It was now difficult to see as far as the end wall of the garden, and when he heard the distant sounds from there Richard realized the ground was not going to open up. No, first the wound in his chest, the fatal wound, would disappear. Then the cuts on his stomach, and the nicks on his hands from where Ayer had resisted, trying to be angry but so scared he had pissed his designer jeans. Finally the pain in his side would go; the first pain, the pain caused by Richard's initial vicious kick after he had pushed his drunken rival over. A spasm of hate, flashes of violence, wipe pans of memory.

Then they would be back to that moment, or a moment before. Something would come towards him, out of the dry, rasping shadows, and they would talk again. How it would go Richard didn't know, but he knew he could win, that he could walk away back to Chris and never come back here again.

It was time. Time to go.

Time to play a different game.

* * *

Michael Marshall Smith's short stories have appeared in many major anthologies and magazines, including *Dark Terrors, Dark Voices, Darklands, The Best New Horror, The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror, Omni* and *Interzone.* His first novel, *Only Forward,* won the British Fantasy Award, while his second, *Spares,* has been optioned for filming by Steven Spielberg's DreamWorks SKG and has so far sold for translation in eight countries. The author is currently working on his third book, *One of Us,* and on a movie adaptation of Robert Faulcon's *Nighthunter* series. '"Walking Wounded" was written — as may be fairly obvious — after

moving from a lonely apartment in London's Belsize Park to a tiny hole in Kentish Town,' says Smith. 'While nothing else in the story is even remotely true, my grumpiness at having half of my possessions put in storage and not being able to buy good pates is accurately represented — and I did in fact break two ribs during the move. Since writing the story my attitude to the area has mellowed somewhat — to the point where we have now bought a house just fifty yards down the road. I'm still a bit annoyed about the pate, though.'

The Lost Boy Found
TERRY LAMSLEY

Emma must have been watching out from the window on the first floor and shouted down to the boy. The front door of the house opened before Daniel had reached the garden gate. Marc stepped out, glanced at his father without giving any gesture of recognition, then trudged towards him with his shoulders hunched and his head bent forward, staring at the ground a yard ahead of him. Daniel stopped to wait for him. In spite of the heat of the day his son was wearing the expensive designer-branded woollen hat he had brought him for his birthday on his last visit. The choice of present had been unfortunate; Daniel now thought it made the boy look foolish.

'How're you doing, Marc?'

'Fine, Dad.' Marc thrust a white plastic box forward. 'My lunch,' he explained. 'Mum said don't buy me any more of the sort of food you gave me last time.'

'You told her about that?'

'I had to. She asked.'

Automatically, Daniel turned and looked up towards his wife's window. He could just see her, standing well back in the room, with her hands clasped together under her chin, as though she was cold. He waved, but got no response.

'A bit of fried chicken every now and then won't kill you, Marc,' Daniel observed, as they walked down the street.

'Mum said there's no need to eat animals. It's cruel.'

Daniel didn't want to get dragged into that. 'The car's parked around the corner,' he said, 'as close as I could get. The town's very busy.'

'It always is on Saturday. You usually come on Sundays.'

'I thought we'd do something different today,' Daniel said carefully, anticipating opposition to this proposal.

'You mean we can't go bowling?'

'We'll give it a miss for once. The weather's so fine. We'll drive out into the country.'

The boy was silent then, but Daniel could sense his disappointment. As they drove away, to change the subject, he said, 'How are your eyes now? No more headaches, I hope?'

Marc had had minor eye surgery a few weeks earlier. Daniel had been working in Scotland at the time, and hadn't been able to visit him in hospital.

'They're okay. I can see for miles. And they say I won't have to

wear those thick glasses again. That's why I'd rather have gone to the Indoor Sport Centre. I wanted to see if it made my bowling better. I bet I could beat you nearly every time now, Dad.'

'You did pretty well before.'

'But you were better.' Marc reached out towards the radio. 'Can I have some music?'

Daniel nodded resignedly. After all, the boy had taken his disappointment about the bowling quite well, and his reason for wanting to play games was a good one.

The car filled with yelping, thudding, electronic pandemonium.

From then on, conversation was out of the question.

Half an hour later Daniel had driven deep into the countryside and was following his inclinations, rather than map directions. He had more or less lost his way, though he didn't want to admit that to Marc. When the boy, taking advantage of his newly improved vision, pointed out a limestone village, gleaming in the glaring sun, that had come into view a couple of miles ahead, Daniel drove towards it automatically, as though it had beckoned to him, and he was unable to resist its allure. It was the only point of interest in an otherwise featureless landscape. It seemed to be hovering a little way in the air, like a vision or mirage, but it sank back into its surroundings as they got nearer. The narrow lanes Daniel found himself negotiating to get to it were maze-like and confusing, but he navigated his way through into the little community at last, after a deal of twisting and back-tracking, and stopped the car at the first opportunity. He turned off the blaring radio at once, and clambered out of the car into an austere silence that was almost a shock.

The village was backed on three sides by hump-like hills, the lower slopes of which were divided into mutton-and lamb-infested fields enclosed by low stone walls. Ahead, a substantial, if somewhat squat looking, eighteenth-century house and an even older pub stood at right angles to each other, apparently blocking the way, though a sign indicated that the road turned left between them. A broad, deep stream slid smoothly alongside the street. Tiny houses, each with its own natty bib of garden at the front, clustered round the dusty parking space where Daniel had come to a halt, and others similar climbed one side of the slope the car had just descended. It was a picturesque setting, and the whole village had a neat, compact, scaled-down, almost toylike look about it.

'This'll do,' Daniel said, leaning back into the driver's door. Marc showed no sign of wanting to get out. He was gazing out at the clear, shining water of the nearby stream with a peculiar expression, as though the sight of it slightly annoyed him.

‘Is this where you wanted to come, Dad?’

‘I had nowhere in particular in mind.’

‘But there’s nothing here. What are we going to do?’

‘We don’t have to *do* anything. Just take a look around.’

Marc pulled his hat lower down his brow, said, ‘I’m thirsty,’ and hauled himself out of the car reluctantly, huffing like an old man. Daniel noted how overweight the overgrown boy still was, in spite of the health-food and vegetarian regimen his mother imposed at home. His big face was waxy, and beginning to go spotty. He was at the awkward age, changing inside and out. In less than two years he’d be a teenager, but he looked like one already, and a troubled one at that. Daniel wanted to tell him to take off the ridiculous hat, but he had only himself to blame for that, and Marc seemed proud of the thing, so he let it be.

The nearby pub looked shut. ‘A village this size is bound to have a shop that’ll sell us a can of Coke,’ Daniel stated optimistically, still feeling he had, perhaps unjustly, for selfish reasons, deprived his son of his ten-pin bowling. ‘Let’s go and find it.’

Marc grunted noncommittally, but did as he was bidden. As they ascended into the village, Daniel, who liked to think of himself as a countryman (because, thirty-seven years earlier he’d been born in a very remote part of England) was aware that he, in his sky-blue jacket and black shirt, and Marc in his baggy bad-boy town clothes and big, clumsy trainers, probably looked an odd and out-of-place pair. Not that there was anyone to pass judgment: nobody else was visible on the streets.

The village was made up of a number of large, ancient, characterful buildings linked together by clusters of small cottages and undistinguished terraces of minute nineteenth-century farm workers’ houses. These dwellings were tightly packed together: uncomfortably so, as though their inhabitants had been reluctant or unable to extend the boundaries of their community into the fields beyond. The streets were narrow, with many sharp turns. There were few people about, and they had a preoccupied, self-contained air, and hardly seemed to be aware of the two visitors as they passed.

Marc spotted a small shop down a side road, but it sold only faded arty-crafty souvenirs and dried flowers, and was shut anyway. It looked as though it had been shut for ever.

‘I wouldn’t like to live here,’ he moaned. ‘Would you, Dad?’

Daniel had to admit not. ‘But it makes a change,’ he insisted. ‘A bit of peace and quiet.’

In fact, the last remark was an understatement. The village was perfectly silent. No dogs barked, no human voices could be heard, no traffic disturbed the peace, no birds sang, and the few people they

encountered moved without sound, as though they walked on shoes shod with velvet soles. The only audible noises were those made by Daniel and Marc, and they too soon grew quiet, hushed by the awesome taciturnity of their surroundings.

In the centre of the village they came upon what seemed to be a walled-off field, though it could have been an ancient village green, with what at first sight appeared to be some kind of ornate monument set in a hollow in the centre. This land, occupied in one corner by half a dozen seedy-looking sheep and their lambs, was more or less trapezium-shaped, and had a single point of entry and exit — a narrow lych-gate, like the entry to a churchyard, in the centre of the shortest of the two roughly parallel sides.

Daniel and his son emerged from the village at a point very close to the gate which, on inspection, they found to be held shut with a tightly wound chain and padlock.

'Do you think that's meant to keep the sheep in or us out, Marc?'

Marc missed the irony, and looked confused. Daniel smiled, and gave the gate a shove. The sound of the chain links grinding against the wooden gatepost tweaked the nerves of the sheep who raised their heads and stood still as statues for seconds, before sinking back into browsing complacency.

'What's that thing out there in the middle, Dad?'

'Not sure. A war memorial for people from this place who died? That sort of thing. I can't think what else it could be.'

'It looks as though someone's been throwing paint at it,' Marc observed. The object was criss-crossed with streaks of red and green.

'Vandals. That could be why they've padlocked the gate.'

'That's silly. It would be easy to get over the wall.'

'Or the gate,' Daniel agreed. A mischievous note in his voice appealed to Marc.

'Shall we, Dad?' he said, encouragingly.

'Why not?'

For some time now Daniel had felt the urge to make a gesture of protest at the oppressive, silent stillness around them: to metaphorically wave two fingers at the village and its invisible or indifferent inhabitants, and it seemed to him that the padlock offered an opportunity to do something of the kind. Nevertheless, he felt rather foolish as he put his foot on one of the cross-bars of the gate and lifted his other leg over the top. He sat astride the gate for a moment, wondering if he had gone too far, but it was plain from the expression on Marc's face that his son thought he had not gone nearly far enough. Daniel realized there was no going back, if he wanted to retain the scrap of outlaw credibility he had so easily acquired, so he dropped down to the ground on the other side of the gate, making

room for the boy to follow him.

'Lots of people come here anyway,' Marc said.

The unmown grass in the field was inches high. Ahead of them a well-worn path, that had obviously been trodden recently by many feet, stretched towards the middle of the enclosed area.

They walked on in silence, through the intense quiet.

The field naturally inclined towards the middle from all directions but as they got nearer to the object of their excursion it became obvious that the structure, whatever it was, protruded out of the centre of a steep-sided, circular pit about thirty feet across and five feet deep.

When they reached the edge, Daniel saw there were dozens of different sets of footprints in the dust around the rim. Marc tumbled awkwardly down into the pit and moments later, feeling some small, unaccountable misgivings, Daniel followed him.

The thing itself, when they got close to it, was rather disappointing. Inside a six-foot circle of extraordinarily thick iron railings were entrapped a number of broad tree trunks that had all been severed just above head height. The railings had been there a long time because, over the years, the sides of the trees had bellied out between the constricting iron uprights in huge bark-splitting blisters that were uncomfortable to contemplate. Up out of the centre of the tight cluster of stunted trees extended what was in all probability a sculptured form representing the top half of a human being. This figure was posed with one arm stretched down, as though taking hold of the top of one of the trees to push itself upwards. Its other arm, bent, and half-raised, was held aloft in what could have been an appeal for help, or a gesture of despair, anger or even triumph. It was impossible to be quite sure if the figure was exactly human, because the whole thing was overgrown by a complex network of thorny tendrils, like briars, that concealed every inch of its surface. Two overgrown lumps on its back suggested to Daniel that it could originally have been the representation of an angel, with wings that had broken off at the base, but nothing about its posture was in any way conventionally angelic.

What had seemed, from a distance, to have been streaks of paint, were in fact strips of torn, brightly-dyed red and green cloth, tied together with yards of ribbon, that had been wound round the edifice in a way that looked entirely haphazard.

Daniel was gazing mystified at all this when Marc called out from almost under his feet, 'There's something down here with writing on, but I can't read what it says.' The boy was crouching down, peering at something close to the ground on one side of the — 'monument' — Daniel could still think of nothing better to call it. He went and stood

next to his son.

A stone tablet, like a simple, unornamented gravestone, was trapped behind the iron railings. The thrust of enormous pressure from the swollen trees behind had cracked it diagonally in two places, and shifted the sections upwards and apart. Close to, it was possible to see some kind of inscription had been cut deeply in the stone. Daniel squatted down to try to make out what was written. 'I can read the letters, but it doesn't make sense. It's foreign, isn't it Dad?'

'It must be, I guess, but God knows what language that is.' A lot of the individual letters were hidden behind the railings, and the surface of the stone had flaked away in places, but, from what remained, it was obvious to Daniel that the original must have been almost unpronounceable.

'—jabber-jabber-jabber,' Marc chanted, in exaggerated mockery. 'Try reading it aloud, Dad. It makes your tongue hurt.'

Daniel grinned, but didn't take up the invitation. He'd given up trying to decipher the memorial message, if that was what it was. Finding solutions to pointless puzzles didn't interest him.

Marc reached up, took hold of the stump of a lopped-off branch of one of the trees, clambered up on to the horizontal iron band through which the tops of the railings protruded, then started cautiously tugging at the tendrils that encrusted the half-emerged figure.

'Watch out for thorns on that thing up there,' Daniel warned, sure that the plant that covered it was some kind of briar.

'It's okay. There's no problem. They all grow inwards.'

'What? Are you sure?'

Marc didn't like it when his father doubted his word. 'It's *true,'* he protested, tearing away whole sections of the plant with the tips of his fingers. 'See for yourself. All the spikes point towards the middle.'

Daniel climbed part of the way up until his face was close to the lowest sections of the briar-like growth that seemed to sprout from around the base of the figure they concealed, and saw that the boy was right. 'That's unusual,' he observed. 'Plants like that grow spikes to protect themselves — against cattle, or people like you and me, for instance, who might want to root them out and destroy them.'

'With all the thorns pointing that way,' the boy said thoughtfully, 'it's as though they're trying to keep something *in,* down there between the trees.'

Daniel grunted noncommittally. His arms, supporting most of his weight, had quickly grown tired, and he dropped back to the ground. Marc, however, climbed higher until he stood on the crest of the 'monument', held on to the upraised arm of the enclosed figure, and yelled out joyfully, as though he had attained the top of an Alp.

Almost at once, to his and his father's surprise, his call was

answered: someone yelled back, in what could have been elation. Daniel and Marc twisted round to face the sound.

Because he was standing chest-deep in the pit, and the ground around him rose in all directions, Daniel couldn't see much more than the slope of the field in front of him, a stretch of the wall that enclosed it, and the tops of a few trees beyond. Whoever had shouted was presumably on the other side of the wall, some distance back, and thus out of his sight.

The shout came again, sounding louder and sharper.

'Who's there? Can you see, Marc?'

The boy, still clasping the upraised hand of the statue, was up on tiptoes, bending towards the sound. 'I think it's a woman.'

'Are you sure? It sounds like a man.'

'I know. But if it is, he's wearing a dress.'

'What kind of dress?'

'Green and red. Very long and loose. The wind's flapping it about, like a big flag.'

'There isn't any wind, Marc: there hasn't been all day.' Daniel started to climb back up to join his son.

The voice called out again.

'I think it's shouting at us, Dad.'

'Whoever it is wants us out of here,' Daniel decided.

'He doesn't sound unfriendly.'

'Even so, I think we ought to go.'

Daniel had hauled himself up almost to the top of the monument and turned in the direction his son had been looking. He saw, some distance beyond the wall, what seemed to be a large article of clothing that had been blown off a washing line by a gale, flapping and fluttering towards him. It was almost impossible to make out the human shape that must be in there somewhere. Some of the movements indicated the actions of hidden arms and legs, but the head remained invisible.

Marc, alarmed by the anxiety in his father's voice, made a hasty move to climb down, then seemed to panic. The lower sleeve of his jacket had become entwined in the briars surrounding the part of the statue he had been trying to uncover.

'It's got me,' he said. 'It won't let go.'

He snatched and tugged wildly at the plant, calling out to his father for help. A section of the briars suddenly snapped, causing him to lose balance. He toppled down against Daniel, and the pair of them, with nothing to cling to, slithered down the sides of the trees to the ground.

Neither was worse than shaken by the fall. Marc got up at once and, without speaking, ran off towards the gate. Daniel looked back

towards the wall. A section of green and red striped fabric billowed over the top briefly, then vanished. Daniel waited to see if it would reappear. When, after half a minute, it hadn't, he shrugged, and trudged out of the pit in pursuit of his son. He was angry now, for allowing himself to become so flustered by what was probably some local eccentric in fancy dress, and cross with Marc for overreacting. They must both have looked very foolish to the character in the striped gown, whoever it was. He was half inclined to seek out and confront the culprit, but then remembered the peculiar way that person's garments had swirled about in air that was totally still, and thought again.

Marc was waiting for him on the other side of the gate, inspecting the damage done to his jacket.

'That wasn't a good idea, Dad. We shouldn't have done that.'

Daniel noticed his son avoided his eye. He said, 'Well, no harm's done.'

As if he wasn't too sure about that, Marc plunged his hands into his pockets and hauled his shoulders up closer to his ears in a truculent gesture. 'I'm hungry now,' he complained. 'Can we go and eat?'

Daniel realized he'd left the packed lunch his ex-wife had provided in the car. The heat in there would not have done it any good.

'Let's get back,' he said. He pointed down a different street to the one they had taken into the village. 'I think if we go down there, it should be a short cut.'

Marc was clearly not enthusiastic about this proposal, but he said, 'Can we *go* then, Dad? Away from this place. Please?'

'Okay,' Daniel said, finally defeated.

'That wasn't a short cut,' Marc complained a quarter of an hour later. 'We're lost, aren't we?'

'You can't really say that, in a little village like this, but, yes, we seem to have lost our bearing at the moment.'

'We've been walking twice as long as it took to get to that field already.'

'It just seems like that because you're hungry.'

'And *thirsty.'*

Daniel decided not to admit that he was too.

An elderly man was coming slowly towards them: the first pedestrian they had seen for some time.

'Ask that bloke the way back to the car,' Marc urged.

They stopped and waited for the man to reach them. His movements were circumspect and indecisive. At the last moment,

when he was about six feet away, he must have sensed their presence, and he looked up. His face shocked them both. He was very old, bent and tiny: his features seemed half obliterated by time. His nose was almost flat, like a partly raised flap in the centre of his face, but had huge nostrils; his lips were so thin and withdrawn as to be virtually absent, and his round, creamy eyes looked blank. He was screwing up his eyes to get the two figures in front of him in focus. His contorted expression would have been comical if it had not also indicated that he was confused and alarmed. Assuming the man felt threatened, and aware that Marc looked intimidating, like the archetypal hooligan, Daniel made his face look friendly.

'Excuse me,' he said. 'We're trying to find our car. I left it near a pub down by the river.'

The old man shook his head as though Daniel's words were outrageous, incredible.

'No, no,' he said. 'I've nothing to say to you. Off you go. Carry on.'

Marc moved a couple of steps towards him. 'We're lost, mister,' he explained. 'We don't know where we are. We just want to get out of here.'

'I can't help you.'

'But you live here, don't you?' Daniel said. 'You're a resident?'

The man made no answer to this. 'Go up to the church,' he said. 'You'll find someone there who'll show you where to go.'

Daniel was becoming annoyed. 'All we need is directions to our car. Which way is the river?'

'You don't understand,' the man said. 'The river runs all around.'

Marc was about to speak again, but Daniel waved a hand to stop him. 'Okay,' he said, 'we'll go to the church. We'll ask there. Where is it?'

'Keep walking the way you were going,' the old man said, as though it was obvious. 'You'll see it.'

Repressing his anger at the old fool's discourtesy, Daniel pushed Marc ahead of him. The man cowered away as they passed. Daniel looked back after they had gone a little way and saw he was feebly fiddling with the latch of a gate. 'I knew he was a local. Ignorant old bugger.'

They trudged on uphill for five minutes before they heard people talking nearby. It was a relief to have the vast, seemingly solid silence broken by something other than the sounds of their own feet. The voices called to each other quietly but urgently, as though instructions were being transmitted over small distances. There were also various tappings and frutterings: work, of some kind, was in progress.

A short footpath leading off the road to the right pointed towards

the apparent source of these sounds. A high, thick hedge concealed this place, but a lych-gate, very similar to the one Daniel and his son had climbed over earlier, offered ingress to whatever lay beyond.

Marc, panting and sweating from the uphill climb, dropped down on a grass verge and stretched out on his back. 'I need a rest, Dad,' he said.

Daniel saw the boy's damp, swollen face and worried again about his physical state. At that age, he was sure, he could have walked all day and thought nothing of it. He hoped Marc's flabby, flaccid condition, and resentful, peevish attitude were things he would grow out of soon. He said, 'Take it easy for a while, then. I'll go and see what's happening over there, and try and find someone with enough sense to tell us how to find the car.'

'Okay.' Marc clasped his hands behind his head and shut his eyes.

This second gate was half open. As Daniel pushed it wider and passed through, a little old lady, sitting next to it at a green baize-covered card-table, rose out of the chair beneath her as if to welcome him. Daniel returned her polite smile, but came to a halt when she held up a hand to restrain him.

'You are just *a little* early,' she said, speaking slowly and precisely. She gazed along the length of some shadows stretching across the ground towards her, thoughtfully, as though she were making some calculation. 'We are not quite ready for you yet. We don't start until ten past two.'

That seemed a peculiar time to start anything. Automatically, Daniel glanced at his watch and saw it was one fifty-six. 'I'm sorry,' he said, 'but I didn't realize. Some kind of event is about to take place, is that it?'

'Of course.' The woman turned and indicated the area behind her. 'As you can see,' she added.

Daniel looked beyond her and found he had entered a large private garden. The design was basic, with a long rectangular stretch of sloping lawn, surrounded on all sides by hedged beds of the usual domestic flowers, leading away towards an unattractive two-storied modern red-brick house. A row of trees formed a curtain behind this dwelling, through which could be seen sections of what was probably an even uglier, off-white, and apparently featureless building beyond. A thin tower attached to this edifice rose a good way above the trees that surrounded it.

On the lawn, at various points, there was orderly activity. A number of stalls had been set out and a group of men were putting the finishing touches to the erection of a big sun-faded green canvas tent; stretching the final guy-ropes and hammering home tent pegs to secure them. Members of a small brass band were emerging from a

side door of the red house and forming a cluster at the far end of the garden, blowing gently into their instruments and resting sheets of music on flimsy metal stands. The musicians, male and female, were buttoned tight into old-fashioned, cheerful-looking, but probably uncomfortably hot jackets with wide, vertical red and green stripes. Each one wore a red cap.

'There's going to be some kind of fête or bazaar,' Daniel observed. 'Good! I hadn't realized.'

Feeling quite pleased with the way things were turning out, because, at such an event, there were bound to be stalls where he and Marc could buy cakes, sandwiches and tea or maybe even, in the tent, beer to drink, Daniel said, 'I'll wait then, since it's only a few minutes. My son's over there,' he explained, unnecessarily.

'Yes,' the woman said. 'I know. We saw you both from a long way off.'

'Did you?' Daniel wondered about the 'we' since the woman was alone and none of the other people assembled in the garden could have seen his approach up the hill through the gate in the tall hedge.

The woman gave him another tranquil smile.

'We have been observing your progress,' she said, giving her quizzical expression another twist, and Daniel remembered the peculiarly dressed figure Marc and he had seen, that had called to them when they had climbed the 'monument'. Presumably, word of their presence had spread that way. It must be a very lonely village indeed, he reflected, where news of such a non-event was instantly turned into hot gossip.

Daniel went back to where he had left Marc, who seemed to be asleep. The sun shone full on his face, but he'd only been there a few minutes, so Daniel knew he was unlikely to come to harm. The child was rarely in the open air, and strong sunlight might even help clear up his acned complexion.

Daniel sat down himself, leaned back against a tree, and enjoyed, for the first time that day, some contentment.

Back in the garden, very softly, the band began to play. They experimented with the first few bars of some jaunty, folky tune then fell silent again.

It was odd, Daniel reflected, that there were no people making their way towards him up the hill: one would expect the population of the dull little hamlet to turn out in force for any kind of diversion. He wondered if most of the village was in fact uninhabited: many of the houses did have a look of shut-up vacancy. Perhaps most of them were second homes, used by the well-off only occasionally, or untenanted holiday cottages. He had heard of cases where whole villages had become depopulated because most of the properties had been bought

up by outside investors. This idea made him feel a little better about his experiences since he had arrived at. Where? He realized he didn't even know the name of the place! Anyway, the deep, awesome silence, that still surrounded him on almost every side was no longer quite so inexplicable and disturbing. It was, of course, quite natural, and only-to-be-expected, if the village *was* almost deserted.

Just before ten past two Daniel roused Marc and told him what was about to happen. The boy, who had not attended a similar function before, seemed nervous at the prospect. Daniel did his best to explain what lay before them as they wandered to and through the lych-gate that now stood wide open. Daniel offered a handful of change to the waiting woman, but she said there was no entry charge.

As father and son stepped on to the lawn, the band struck up with audible enthusiasm. Daniel was mildly surprised to find that they seemed to be the only visitors so far. In fact, there were fewer people about than there had been earlier, when he had watched some of the last-minute preparations for the event. Perhaps the helpers he had seen then had withdrawn into the marquee to refresh themselves: he could hear the murmur of voices from that direction.

The first stall he came to was covered in tumbling heaps of White Elephants. Daniel paused dutifully as he passed, but hurried on when the over-anxious assistant stooped to retrieve various articles he dislodged when he clumsily lifted a faded lampshade at the bottom of one of the piles of sad junk. He bought five tickets at an instant raffle of bottles of wine and spirits and bathroom soaps and medications, but won nothing, then moved on to a book stall covered in old, valuable looking volumes mostly in a foreign language. The printed words looked to be in the same language as the inscription on the base of the monument, or whatever it was he and Marc had discovered. He wanted to ask about this, but the stall was unattended: a tin with a slot cut into the top, next to a small sign saying CONTRIBUTIONS GRATEFULLY ACCEPTED acted as a receptacle for self-assessed donations. Daniel nearly purchased a book, out of curiosity, but it was surprisingly heavy, as though its leather bindings concealed lead covers. He decided he did not want to be burdened by it for the rest of the day, put it down, and moved on.

Next was some kind of game he couldn't understand, but had a go at nevertheless. The rather glum, shifty-looking man behind the trestle table told him, when asked, it was called 'Lost and Found'. It involved a large number of brightly covered cards spread over a white sheet, and a vertical board, nailed to the trunk of a nearby tree, on which had been drawn a diagram of baffling complexity. Daniel paid the man fifty pence, and was told to select three of the cards and turn

them over slowly, one by one. On the reverse of the first was written 'LOST'. The man took it from him and, referring to the design on the board, traced a path along the centre of it with his finger. When he came to a stop, he turned and said, 'Very good, sir: excellent,' and reached out for the second card. Daniel was slightly dispirited to find, as he handed it over, it also had 'LOST' on the back. The man seemed to cheer up a little when he saw it, however, and turned eagerly back to his chart. He used two fingers to plot converging courses this time, and gave a grunt of what sounded like triumph when the tips of them came together at the top right-hand corner of the board. He actually smirked at Daniel then, and said, 'And the next one sir? Is it going to be third time lucky?'

'I hope so,' Daniel said, trying to smile back. But his heart sank as he turned the final card, because he was sure he was going to see the word 'LOST' again.

He was wrong.

'"FOUND",' he read aloud, sounding absurdly relieved. 'There you are,' he added as he handed the card over, as though some kind of bargain had been struck.

'And there *you* are, sir,' the man said as he accepted it. This time he hardly consulted the board: after glancing at it in mild puzzlement for a second, he stabbed a finger towards a point in the centre of the design, then held up the card — and called out, 'Congratulations — well *done.* You've won something, sir.'

At this, quiet clapping sounded nearby. Daniel glanced around and saw that more visitors must have entered the garden. Half a dozen or so close by were watching him, nodding their heads sombrely in approval, and bringing their hands carefully together.

'Would the boy like to choose a prize?' the stall assistant asked, looking almost jovial now. He held out a box full of objects identically gift-wrapped in gold and silver paper, like birthday presents.

Marc, who had been standing some paces back from the table in an attempt to disassociate himself from his father's activities, shook his head and tugged at his hat with both hands in embarrassment.

'You're all right,' he muttered awkwardly, 'I'm not bothered.'

'Oh, come on, Marc.' Daniel was aware of the small audience around them, and anxious to move on to where they would not be the centre of attention. 'Pick one out, and we'll go and find something to eat. Let's get on.'

For a moment it looked as though the boy was going to refuse to comply. At the first sight of rebellion the stallholder's face took on an impatient, intolerant look. He stepped forward and thrust the box towards Marc, who gave way immediately. He blushed, snatched the nearest prize, and held it out to his father. Daniel grabbed his arm and

steered him away towards the big tent.

'Don't you want to see what you've won?' Marc asked.

'We can open it later. If it's any good, you can have it.'

'It'll just be rubbish,' Marc complained. 'Something useless.'

'You never know,' Daniel said, aware, however, that his son was right. They would probably end up throwing his 'prize' away.

They had to walk around the tent twice before they found the way in. The entrance was a flap that hung closed and almost invisible in the dark shadows cast by the descending sun. Daniel pulled it aside and peered in.

About a dozen small, stocky men were gathered together at one end of the marquee, drinking beer from disposable plastic tumblers. They stood in a line along a makeshift bar, with their backs towards the two newcomers. They were talking quietly but somewhat excitedly to each other with the easy familiarity of the long-acquainted. Locals, Daniel thought, probably village-born: they'd be sure to be able to tell him how to find his way back to his car. He stooped and stepped into the tent, then turned and waited for Marc to join him.

The air inside smelt of old canvas and trampled grass, and was cool, sharp and agricultural. The boy entered suspiciously, glancing covertly about him as though he feared he might be entering a trap. Daniel smiled sadly at this display of adolescent unease, and wished he could say or do something to quell his son's excessive self-consciousness and irrational and seemingly habitual anxiety.

A couple of the men moved aside as Daniel reached the bar, but not very far, as though they were none too keen to make way. They seemed incurious about the visitors, and otherwise ignored them. Daniel postponed asking about his car for the moment, and bought a pint of pale, soapy looking beer for himself and cola for Marc. There was no food on offer. They sat at a skimpy table some distance from the other drinkers, on metal chairs with thin legs that dug into the ground under their weight.

'That sinking feeling,' Daniel thought ruefully. He sipped his beer. It was flat but sharp, like brine. Undrinkable. So far, the day had been a failure: Marc would certainly have preferred to have stayed at home. They should have gone bowling, as usual. Marc was simply not interested in the countryside: to the city boy, it was like a foreign land, and a hostile one at that.

'Looks as though they're going to put on some kind of play,' Marc said, after he had observed the assembled men for a while. 'Two of them are wearing masks, I think.'

Daniel turned and followed Marc's line of vision, towards four of the men at the far end of the bar. They were standing very close together and bending forward so their faces were hidden.

‘The two in the middle,’ Marc said, speaking very quietly. ‘You won’t be able to see them from where you’re sitting, but I can, just.’

After tugging his chair out of the soft turf Daniel edged closer to his son. As if aware of his stratagem, the men bunched even closer, though they were still looking away and could not have caught the movements behind them.

‘Perhaps they’re mummers, Marc,’ Daniel suggested. ‘Amateur actors. They perform old folk plays,’ he explained, when he saw the boy’s look of incomprehension. ‘A bit like pantomimes, that sort of thing, with lots of fooling about.’

‘Their masks aren’t very funny. They’re weird. They look like fish.’

Daniel nodded. ‘That’s about right. Probably goes back to nature worship — giving thanks for the creatures of the field and stream. Or maybe it’s religious, what they call a mystery play — Noah’s Ark, and the animals going in two by two.’

‘I didn’t know he had fish on board.’

‘Well, perhaps not,’ Daniel admitted. ‘The Flood wouldn’t have troubled them, I don’t suppose. Though some of them might have got stranded in some strange places when the waters went down.’

Marc shrugged. He was still studying the four men. ‘The others aren’t wearing masks.’

‘They may put them on later. I expect your face gets hot under one of those things on a day like this.’

Marc grimaced and pushed his half-empty glass of cola to the centre of the table. ‘You were going to ask the way to the car.’

‘Yup; you’re right. We should be going.’

Feeling, nevertheless, rather irresolute, Daniel rose again from his sunken seat and approached the person nearest to him at the bar.

‘Excuse me.’ He tapped the man lightly on the arm, then repeated the request for directions he had made to the elderly pedestrian earlier. There was no immediate response, though the man tensed, so Daniel knew he had made some kind of contact. He remained where he was, aware that he loomed rather over the assembled company. He deliberately laid a hand on the counter where he knew it would be seen by the person standing beside him, and drummed his fingers hopefully on the beer-soaked wooden surface. At last the man swivelled round from the hips, looked up, and gave Daniel a hard stare. He had a raw, red face, cracked at angles around the nose and mouth like old leather, and tiny, round eyes: *very* tiny eyes, Daniel thought, and felt himself gasp as he looked into them. About the same size and shape as his thumb nail, they were as insensate and uncomprehending as stones, and shone brightly, as though they had been polished. Daniel dropped his own gaze away from them at once,

down to the man's mouth, that was slowly opening.

Nearby, someone began to chatter in what sounded like a foreign language. The man next to Daniel, speaking backwards over his shoulder, answered in the same tongue. The men exchanged a few short sentences, their voices clicking and clucking like angry chickens, or so it seemed to Daniel's ears, then both fell silent. The person Daniel had originally addressed turned back towards his companion then, deliberately, in a gesture positively dismissive of himself, Daniel thought.

He was annoyed with this treatment, but alarmed as well. At first, he had half-suspected the men were speaking in made-up gibberish, to make fun of him, but the absolute lack of any sign of humour in their expressions; in their lack, indeed, of recognizable emotions on their faces at all; and the absence of any motive to mock him that he could think of, made him doubt the truth of that surmise. And the man's little eyes! Those utterly strange crystalline eyes that had registered absolutely nothing when they had been turned towards him, as though he had been invisible!

Except to turn to look at him, the man had totally ignored him, though he suspected he was the subject of the exchange of speech that had then ensued.

Now feeling almost desperately in need of the simple information he had been seeking, Daniel was tempted to move down the line of men and try again with someone else. Then he remembered Marc's observation that some of those at the far end were perhaps wearing masks. It occurred to him that the person he had just approached, seen from some distance, might have been thought to have been wearing a mask too, so rigid had been his features. He leaned forwards over the bar and looked down its length, along the front of the line of men, who were all a good six inches or more shorter than himself, in an attempt to get a better angle to take a look at them individually. As he moved, they did too, as though they were joined together by wires.

No, Daniel thought — *not* quite like that: more like a shoal of fish dipping and turning away through clear water in formation, with perfect coordination, as though they could read each other's thoughts and intentions!

And, by implication, his, as well.

Though none of them had been looking in his direction, they had changed position in such a way, and so expertly, that he could not see any part of any one of their faces.

He experimented one more time, pushing himself even further forward, with the same result. Each of the little men at once adjusted his posture so as to conceal his own and his nearest companion's

features.

They're all wearing masks, Daniel thought. Or *none* of them are. That's what they're hiding. None of them have real faces!

He stumbled back away from the bar and spoke Marc's name sharply. The boy jumped to his feet in consternation at the tone of his father's voice.

Daniel grabbed his son and hauled him towards the exit flap, which, as they approached it, bulged towards them as someone pushed through into the marquee from the outside. A figure emerged rather hurriedly. A man about five feet tall, his head thatched with layers of short grey hair, with a long, bone-thin, but otherwise normal, *mobile* face, stood just inside the tent in front of Daniel and Marc. He was not so much clothed as enwrapped, or self-enshrouded, in a full-length cape of some dark, drab material he gripped close about him, and through which only his head and scrawny wrists and hands protruded, his feet being hidden by folds of cloth that trailed the ground around him. The man barred their way by his presence, but there was nothing overtly threatening about him. He held out both hands in front of him at waist height in what could have been a gesture of benediction, then moved one hand further forward purposefully. Somewhat reluctantly, Daniel took it and shook it. The man smiled broadly, arching his eyes in a way that gave him a slightly ludicrous, even clownish, look.

'Welcome, welcome,' he gushed, in a high, buzzing voice. 'It's good of you to come and support our little gathering. I hope you've been having fun.'

Fun? Daniel looked the man in the eyes searching for signs of mockery, or, at least, of irony. He saw none.

'We just happened to be passing through,' he explained, 'and stopped to take a look round. We didn't come specially to attend this. event.'

The man shook his head sorrowfully. 'We get so few visitors here,' he complained. 'It's such an out-of-the-way spot. We are, all of us here, in some sense, refugees from the world, if the truth be known, and perhaps a little too isolated. It's only rarely that anyone discovers our existence, and comes amongst us. When we *are* discovered, and someone wanders into our community from outside, it's always a time of great excitement for us. And sadly, *very* sadly, nobody ever comes back. It's such a difficult place to find, and people like yourself forget about our existence so easily, so quickly.'

Daniel thought the man must be exaggerating wildly, and wondered if he was quite right in the head. The sample section of the population he had met seemed anything but excited to see visitors.

'We got lost, actually. Found this place by accident.'

‘Quite so.’

‘Then we mislaid our car.’

‘Really!’ The man made it sound like a clever thing to do.

‘I’d appreciate some help,’ Daniel admitted. ‘Some directions.’

‘Of course you would,’ the man agreed. ‘I can understand that.’

‘We searched about, but seemed to be going round in circles.’

‘Well, yes; you probably were. It’s a maze of a place, our village. It couldn’t be *more* difficult to find your way about. It’s almost as though it had been designed to confuse.’ All this was said in a cheerful, matter-of-fact way, but was hardly helpful, Daniel thought.

‘We parked the car by the river,’ he said. ‘If you could point us in that direction?’

‘No problem at all.’ The man smiled benignly. ‘The simplest thing in the world.’ He had released his grasp of the huge cloak he was draped in when he had shaken hands. Gradually, it had fallen loose around his neck to reveal a dog-collar. A grubby, grey and frayed dog-collar. ‘The only difficulty is, which part of the river?’ he continued. ‘It flows all around, you see.’

Daniel had heard that before. ‘It can hardly flow *all* around,’ he protested.

‘I assure you it does,’ the reverend gentleman insisted. ‘Quite literally so. Round and round and round.’

‘Dad!’ Marc sounded angry and impatient. Daniel turned towards him. The boy pulled a crazy face, tapped his left temple, and inclined his head towards the man in the dog-collar.

The vicar saw this, and grinned brightly. Slowly, with smooth motions, he placed his hands together across his chest as though he was about to pray, audibly took a deep breath, then abruptly reached forward and thrust out his hands so the tips of his index fingers just touched Marc’s forehead in the centre, directly above his nose. The boy stood fixed to the spot for a moment, then he gasped and reacted belatedly by jerking his head back seconds after the contact had been made. Daniel turned towards the priest to protest at what could have been an aggressive action, but, as he did so Marc dodged swiftly round the figure in front of them and exited through the flap in the canvas. Daniel, after a brief hesitation, followed him. The vicar, who made no attempt to obstruct either of them, followed Daniel.

Marc was almost running now, past the front of the red brick house close to which the now absent band had been playing. Daniel had no choice but to pursue him. Unabashed, the man in the cloak trotted beside him.

‘I think the boy must be anxious to visit hallowed ground,’ he said. ‘He’s heading in that direction. Your son, I assume?’

Daniel grunted in acknowledgment of this fact.

‘A fine lad. He’ll find plenty to amuse him in our place of worship if he’s interested in that sort of thing.’

‘He isn’t. Not even slightly. As far as I know, he’s never been inside a church in his life.’

‘Really?’ The little man seemed to sneer, then took command of himself and forced his face back into its customary expression of excessive good humour. ‘Well, I suppose there must be many young people like that nowadays. We are all regular attendees here, of course. We’re holding a service very soon, as it happens. I’m on my way to prepare for it now. I hope you’ll join us.’

‘I’d rather be on my way out of this place.’

‘But your son has other ideas, I think.’

‘You’re wrong. I’m certain he hasn’t the slightest interest in your bloody church.’

‘We shall see,’ the vicar said amiably, apparently unoffended by Daniel’s deliberate rudeness.

Ahead of them a bare, gaunt, ugly building had become visible through the trees at the back of the garden. Its walls had a sickly green colour, and it had a red tiled roof. At first it looked nothing like a church, but Daniel saw that its windows were of stained glass, and that it was situated at the edge of a tiny graveyard containing perhaps a couple of dozen weather-worn tombstones. Then, with a shock, he realized why the bleak, slab-sided building was so lacking in ecclesiastical charisma: the outer surface of the walls had been coated with what looked like cement. To keep out the damp, presumably. Pale green moss or lichen had grown over most of this cladding, creating an unpleasant, messy, musty effect. Daniel thought, as he drew nearer to the place, he could detect a concomitant odour of damp rottenness in the air. A tall tower, like a fat chimney with many unglazed windows, was attached to one corner of the building.

Marc disappeared briefly behind some shrubbery, then re-emerged near a gate in the fence at the back of the garden. Here he paused briefly and looked back, then slipped through the gate into the graveyard beyond.

Two slender, stooping, darkly dressed figures came out of the church and stood close to the porch in front of the open door. They were looking towards Marc as though they were expecting him to arrive at that moment: had, indeed, been waiting for him. This was somewhat disconcerting, but there was nothing very alarming about their appearance: from their movements they seemed to be a rather frail, elderly couple. Vergers, probably, but the sight of them caused Daniel’s heart to trip in a sudden and poignant surge of apprehension. For no obvious reason, he was suddenly concerned for his son’s physical safety. He came to a stop, to consider his position.

He found he was still holding the prize he had won earlier. The thing had come partially unwrapped, and he was able to see what it was; a model of the object he and Marc had discovered soon after they had arrived in the village, that he had decided was some kind of monument. About fifteen inches long, it was well made, with very finely worked details, he noticed, even down to the lettering on the broken stone tablet at the base. It was made of some yellow metal that shone like gold. The figure emerging from the base, stripped, in the representation, of the clinging briars that masked the actual object, was rendered with fastidious care. It appeared to be that of a victorious warrior, and certainly not an angel. The projections on its back could have been rudimentary wings, though they more resembled fins. Its minute face pulled tight in an expression of gleeful, vindictive triumph, snarled up at Daniel, baring its tiny sharp teeth. Its one raised fist appeared to stab the air victoriously. It looked somehow familiar, and it took Daniel a few moments to realize it could have been a portrait of the seemingly demented clergyman as a much younger man. He considered hurling the ugly thing away, but something made him finally reluctant to do that, and he rewrapped it as best he could and stuffed it upside down into his pocket.

The vicar, meanwhile, had marched on towards the church, presumably to participate in the forthcoming service he had mentioned. There was no sign of Marc now, or the two old people who had positioned themselves outside the building, and the vicar, well ahead and striding swiftly, would soon reach the church himself. Daniel started after him, but he knew there was no hope of catching up with the man before he vanished inside. As he entered the graveyard he heard a loud noise in front of him and assumed the vicar had slammed the door shut behind him. Daniel guessed it would be locked when he reached it, and found he was correct in that assumption. He rattled the latch, twisted the big iron handle, and thumped the solid, heavy wooden door with the palm of his hand, to no effect.

He was used to the idea that many country churches were kept locked most of the time for fear of burglars, but he had never heard of anyone shutting in the congregation! He suspected there *were* people inside, though he had not actually seen anyone enter. Probably a large proportion of the population of the village were gathered there. And where else could his son have gone, unless he was hiding behind one of the gravestones? No: Daniel was sure the boy had long since grown out of such foolishness: at his age, he was too self-conscious and insecure to play infantile pranks.

It occurred to Daniel it would be a good idea to walk round the church to see if there was another entry. He soon discovered there was

not, and found himself again confronting the door that was closed to him. Resisting the desire to try to force an entry, and realizing that would not be possible without the aid of a battering ram, he flung himself down on a nearby wooden seat, folded his arms, and glared angrily down at the ground in front of him. Then he noticed something he had missed before: on the paving stones on either side of the little porch that fronted the church, positioned just about on the spots where the two old people, the vergers, had been standing minutes earlier, were two dark patches of what at first he assumed was water. Curious, and with nothing better to do, he went over and squatted down to inspect one of the damp places. If it was basically water, it was mixed with something else — something that glistened slightly, that had a greenish hue a similar colour to the lichen that grew on the cement-clad walls of the church, and that had a pungent, bitter odour. There was a hint of ozone in the smell, and something else far more unpleasant. The liquid, whatever it was, was drying out quickly in the glare of the sun but, if it *had* come from the two old people, they must have been dripping wet: absolutely soaked in the stuff! And how they must have stunk! He would not have liked to be in an enclosed space with them.

Inside the church, for instance.

Daniel was now very concerned about Marc. Why had the vicar allowed the boy in, and shut *him* out? The man had invited them both to the service.

Then Daniel remembered that the dog-collar round the vicar's neck had been worn almost threadbare, and was filthy.

Somewhere back in the garden the band began to play again. After a few seconds Daniel noticed the sound they were making was getting louder, and guessed they were on the march now, and heading towards the church. He stood gazing in their direction rather nervously, waiting for them to appear through the trees.

Daniel had left the gate that gave access to the churchyard open when he had passed through it. A man with a drum was the first of the musicians to reach it. He then came to a Halt. Small, thickset and ungainly, swaying slightly as he marched on the spot, he looked as though he was stewing inside his tight, thick uniform. His sweat-slicked face was mottled with poppy-red blotches and his angry little eyes, staring furiously at Daniel, looked as though they might crack and burst, like chilled eggs dropped in boiling water. The man whacked both sides of the drum in a way that suggested barely controlled fury with two leather tipped, dumbbell-like sticks, producing enough sound to drown out most of the noise made by the rest of the band, who, visible now, and approaching at a funereal

pace, were still some way behind. From the position the man had taken, and his commanding, threatening posture, it seemed to Daniel that he had deliberately taken it upon himself to act as guardian of the gate: a sentinel who would not let anyone in or out. The fellow seemed to be challenging Daniel to try to pass through, if he dared!

Unable to allocate a cause for this behaviour, Daniel stood his ground, staring mildly back at the drummer and grinning awkwardly in bafflement at the man's inexplicable and inappropriate aggressiveness. If he thought his grin might have some mellowing effect, he was wrong. The musician's chest rose at the sight of it, his chin came up, and his whole figure seemed to expand and grow taller with pride — or was it triumph.?

Daniel's smile froze slowly on his face as the rest of the band caught up with their leader, lined up behind him and began to march forward towards the church, because behind them, he saw, were many more people, also advancing towards him. They were spread out among the trees, and, looking around, Daniel saw they formed an arc as far as he could see: an arc that was almost certainly a section of a circle of men and women stretching all around the graveyard. By the time the possible significance of this fact had registered in his mind, Daniel found he was partly encircled by a second, much closer, arc of people, formed by members of the band. He had not given the musicians any attention before because he had no ear for, and was therefore unable to get pleasure from, music of any kind, but now, he realized, some of them were more than a little *peculiar* looking. Their faces were partly concealed by the brass instruments they were playing, so it was not possible to detect exactly what was wrong with the features of many of them, but the distortions were greater than one would expect from the normal effort required to produce notes, he thought.

The drummer now stood directly in front of Daniel, about ten feet away. His unrelenting pounding of the instrument was deafening at that distance: Daniel felt each beat like a blow against his own chest. The din made the ground beneath him quake and his knees shake, and even seemed to affect his bowels and stomach. The sounds the rest of the band were making were awful too, to his hearing, and had a worse effect on him than music normally did. Then he realized it wasn't just the faces of the players that were strange; their instruments were unconventional, too. The valves were surely longer and thinner, the brass tubes twisted in over-ornate curves, and the bells pointed down and around in ways unlike other trumpets and trombones he had seen before. He could not be certain, because he didn't trust his own ears, but he thought the range of tones produced was different to those obtained from normal instruments.

These reflections were driven from his mind when the entire band started to march forward, closing ranks as they did so, forcing him to back away towards the church. They advanced in a determined rather than menacing way. With the exception of the drummer, who continued to scowl directly at him, they had their eyes almost shut, and seemed to be concentrating totally on the production of the sounds they were making. Nevertheless, Daniel did feel menaced. He made some effort to brave it out and held his ground as long as he could, until they were close enough for him to reach out and touch. Then, trying to maintain as much dignity as possible, he turned and retreated.

Arid found himself moving towards the welcoming face and the outstretched arms of the priest. The man stood just in front of the now wide open door to the church. The musicians suddenly seemed to run out of steam. The music they were playing fell apart in discordant tatters as, one by one, in quick succession, they stopped playing. Within seconds a shocking silence returned — shocking, that was, to Daniel, who had been beginning to think the noise would never stop.

Into the silence, the priest said, 'You look troubled. I hope our celebrations have not over-excited you. Perhaps you would like to enter our little sanctuary for a while, until you regain your composure.' His voice was deadly calm, cold even, undermining, to some extent, the authenticity of his benign expression.

Daniel badly wanted to see inside the church, out of curiosity now, and because he expected to find Marc there, but, now he was invited to enter the building, he was reluctant to take up the offer. He felt totally confused by the circumstances he found himself in, in fact, and wanted to come to some understanding of recent events, within himself, before embarking on any further action.

He shook his head vacantly, as though he hoped to toss his disordered thoughts into some more meaningful pattern, then looked about him again. The people who, minutes earlier, he had seen advancing through the trees, had all reached the churchyard wall, and had come to a stop there. There were dozens of them and they formed a barricade through which Daniel knew he would not be able to pass without violence, if their intention was to obstruct him. And what other purpose could they have? They stood in silence, watching him patiently, but alertly, as though they were keen to see what his next move would be.

He was sure, now, that some preordained event, incomprehensible to, yet vitally involving, himself, had been set in motion, perhaps unconsciously, by his own actions.

He was anxious to understand the nature of his predicament.

It occurred to him that the only way he could discover what his

part in this ritual was to be was to submit himself to the expectation and requirements of the people surrounding him. Reluctantly, he decided he would also have to put himself in the hands of the priest, who, his instincts told him, he could not trust. He could see no other option.

As he marched towards the vicar, who stepped back eagerly to let him pass, he noticed the man's robe had fallen open at the front. Under it, he was wearing more ornate apparel: a flowing, silky vestment of vertical red and green stripes that billowed and squirmed around his stationary body as though it had a life of its own.

It was chilly, and darker than Daniel expected, inside the church. Instinctively, he knew he was not alone there, though as far as he could make out the few rows of narrow pews were empty. Very little of the bright sunlight outside passed through the filters of deeply coloured glass at the windows that were themselves partly covered by the green mould that clung to the outer walls.

A large number of ancient banners, draped apparently haphazardly from the rafters, hung down almost to the floor along the length of the aisle, forming a kind of maze. The fabric of the banners, embroidered with faded heraldic designs of great complexity, was ancient, tattered and rotten. Daniel had to push layer after layer of this dank material aside as he attempted to make his way towards the front of the church. Somewhere ahead he could hear water lapping, and twice he heard a gentle splashing sound that seemed quite out of place in such surroundings. Something large, he thought, was moving slowly and cautiously about in deep water somewhere in front of him: something that was perhaps aware of his presence in the building.

When the sound was repeated a third time, Daniel, who judged he was about halfway down the length of the church, stopped and called Marc's name. There was no answer but, seconds later, he heard the creak of a door, and someone took a few hasty steps across the right hand corner of the church. Daniel called out again, his voice so loud now it startled him, then tried to run forward through the dangling confusion of banners to try to catch a glimpse of whoever was ahead of him. After a few moments, from the same distant quarter of the church, he heard a door slam shut. He scratched impatiently at the draperies that hindered him and concealed his view ahead, tearing some of them from their fixtures on the rafters. They fell behind him slowly and clumsily, with anguished sounds like heavy sighs, filling the air as they descended with a deeper, choking mustiness that entered Daniel's nose and mouth and eyes. Brought to a halt by this polluting filth, he hawked and spat to clear his throat and wiped his eyes, in bewilderment as much as irritation. He was no longer quite

sure which direction he was facing. He seemed to have walked a long way, at least the length of the church, as far as he could estimate from his memories of the size of the exterior of the building, and he wondered if he had turned back on himself. The sound of splashing, now sounding behind his left shoulder, seemed to confirm this suspicion, and he swivelled round and set off in that direction.

Seconds later he jerked one of the draperies aside and found no more ahead of him. He had reached an open, empty space at the end of the church. He'd expected to find some kind of altar there, but there was nothing of the kind apparent in the gloom. A splashing sound from somewhere near by drew his attention down to ground level and he saw he had come close to the edge of a large, rectangular pool of murky water. Ripples were spreading out from a point near the middle and lapping against the crudely cut stone sides of the pool, disturbing a crust of tiny grey-leaved plants that floated over the greater part of its surface.

After gazing at the steadily expanding ripples for some moments, Daniel dropped to his knees and dipped his cupped hands into the tepid water. He stooped forward and flung some of it over his face to clear away the dust and muck that had gathered there as he had made his way through the maze of curtains. The water, though refreshing, tasted foul on his lips, and had the same slightly offensive smell as the patches of dampness left by the old people who had been waiting for Marc outside the church.

Daniel was about to call out his son's name again when he heard the boy's voice shouting. It sounded muffled, from a long way off. The cry seemed to come from the sky. It took Daniel a few seconds to understand that the boy must somehow have found his way up into the tower. He shouted, 'It's all right, Marc. I'm here. Stay where you are. I'll come and get you.'

An answering call, that sounded even further away, was incomprehensible, but it proved his voice had been heard. Marc would at least be reassured to know he was there.

Daniel looked around for some way into the tower. A single door, hard against the right hand side of the pool, was the only possible way into other parts of the building. It was accessible by a narrow path, about a foot wide, that surrounded the pool on three sides. Daniel ventured along it sideways, finding he had to slide his back along the wall because otherwise his wide shoulders threw him off balance. In spite of his feeling of urgency, he moved cautiously. He was very sure he did not want to tumble into the water and find himself in the company of whatever else it contained.

His disappointment at finding the door was locked and totally unresponsive to the small amount of leverage he was able to exert

against it, from his precarious position, almost overwhelmed him. In frustration, he kicked it with his heels and thumped it with his fist, but didn't even get the satisfaction of hearing it rattle on its hinges. At last, he squirmed back along the ledge and slumped to the floor by the side of the pool and stared down into its depths. He noticed something he had missed before: at one point a set of steep stone steps descended below the surface. The water was clearer than he had thought, and he was able to count down to as far as the seventh step before the rest became a blur.

Then he heard Marc's voice calling again, sounding more demanding now. He decided to get out of the church to try to find some other way of getting to the boy. There may be some way up to him from outside. At least he should be able to see and talk to Marc through one of the tiny windows at the top of the tower.

Instead of pressing back through the ancient drapery, Daniel edged his way back along the wall of the church, much as he had along part of the perimeter of the pool. This sideways method of locomotion enabled him to locate the main door of the church without difficulty and he burst through it with some aggression, determined to deal with the vicar and whoever else might be waiting for him outside in whatever way he had to. He was ready for violence now.

It was perhaps fortunate, then, that he found nobody there to oppose him. All the people who had been gathered around the church, including the shabby clergyman, had withdrawn, vanished. He could hear the sound of the band some distance away, the piping and droning of their music becoming fainter as he listened.

He paced some yards away from the tower, turned, looked up, and shouted for Marc. Almost at once, the boy's face appeared, framed in the highest of the narrow windows. 'I'm all right, Dad,' he called. 'Don't worry.'

'Can you get down, Marc? Can you see any way out?'

'I don't want to get out. I like it here. They're going to look after me. They want me to stay.'

'What are you talking about, Marc? I don't understand. Who wants you to stay?'

Marc stepped back a little from the window. 'You know. You saw them — the people who live here.'

Daniel found he was almost inarticulate with anger. He spluttered as he spoke. 'I don't care what *they* want. You're coming with me, if I can get you out. I have to take you home.'

Marc shook his head. As far as Daniel could see, the boy looked happy. That, in itself, was annoying.

'I'm never going to leave this place, Dad,' Marc said patiently, as though Daniel was the child and he the father. 'And there's no way

you can make me. Get out yourself, while you can. They'll let you go *now,* at once, but they might change their minds at any minute. And I warn you, if they do, they can be *terrible*. '

Daniel remembered the tiny, round, stone-cold eyes of the people he'd come close to, and shuddered. He became afraid. The calm tone of his son's voice scared him, too.

'I can see a long way from up here,' Marc said, in a nonchalant, dreamy voice. 'It's true about the river running all around. It's a very wide river. The village is surrounded by water in all directions, as far as I can see.'

Daniel concluded that either he or Marc was mad. In an effort to cling to his own sanity, he shouted, 'Never mind all that. Can you see the car?'

'Of course I can. Very clearly.'

'Where is it?'

Marc held his hand in front of his face and pointed. 'There. Where we left it.'

'How do I get to it?'

'Just follow the path beyond the gate. Takes you straight to it, Dad.'

Daniel found he believed the boy unquestioningly. The car would be where he said, at the end of the path. The thing to do now was to get out, and come back later with reinforcements to set Marc free. There was nothing that he, Daniel, could do alone, in the face of his son's stubborn rejection of his offers of assistance.

'I'm going, then, Marc, but don't worry — I'll be back soon. I'll bring help.'

He thought he heard Marc laugh in an easy, light, and totally uncharacteristic way, but the boy made no further comment. He waved his hand, and stepped back into the tower. Daniel didn't wait to see if his son would reappear. He ran off down the path as quickly as he could, as though he feared he might be pursued by.

He knew not what.

He found the car easily, as Marc had said he would, and drove out of the village without trouble.

Heading back towards the town from which he had collected his son earlier that day, Daniel's heart and mind were full of slow-burning anger, outrage and confusion. He felt some mean but astonishingly skilful trick had been played on him. And he felt tormented. Somewhere, at that moment, he was being laughed at, he was sure: his defeat and consequent retreat were being mocked by the inhabitants of the village whose sleight-of-hand vanishing trick had deprived him of his son and, at the same time, his dignity and self-

respect. What promises had they made to Marc? What had they offered him that had captivated the boy? What had they got to give that *he* hadn't?

He was determined to get his revenge. Even though, as far as he knew, no actual crime had been committed, he would report Marc missing to the police and force them to investigate every building in the village, drive out the inhabitants from wherever they were hiding, and compel them to return Marc to him.

And, if any harm had been done to the boy.? Daniel's mind winced away from the thought. He would try to deal with that eventuality, if and when he had to.

For a while he couldn't decide if he ought to go to his wife first, before he involved the police. Then he realized that he was late in returning the boy: Emma would have become concerned about Marc's whereabouts a long time ago, and may well have informed the police herself. She may even have thought that he, Daniel, had snatched their son away: he had never concealed his dissatisfaction, contempt even, of the way she had brought the child up, or his own conviction that he could have done a much better job of it!

Daniel found he had been driving very slowly, almost in a daze. He shook himself awake and put on some speed, suddenly keen and anxious to confront his wife. He wanted to see how she would react when he told her the news. Would she blame him? Would she hate him? Both these things, probably, and more. Daniel felt the beginnings of something like joy stirring inside him, which increased along with the exhilaration of speed as he drove faster and faster. At one point it occurred to him that if he made one sharp movement of the steering wheel to the left or right he would hit one or other of the high walls he was passing on either side — and he would undoubtedly the instantly, and in a spectacular way. He gave this exciting possibility all his attention for a while, but, by the time he had decided whether or not to take action one way or the other, the walls were miles behind him, and the impulse had passed. He drove more steadily then, until he arrived outside the house where Emma had her flat.

He was surprised that she did not answer the door at once when he rang the bell. Had she not been looking out of her window, as she had been when he had called to collect Marc, watching for his return? He couldn't believe she would have been able to control her anxiety to that extent.

Maybe she had gone looking for him? She knew he had taken Marc bowling each time he called, and had no reason to believe he had not done so on the present occasion. The thought nagged him for the next minute, until Emma did appear.

She stood well back behind the open door. Her puffy, chalky face

shone like a misty moon in the darkness of the hallway. She looked at Daniel in silence, wearing her usual expression of pained irritability, softened to some extent now by something like sorrow or pity that was just perceptible in her eyes and the line of her mouth.

'What is it this time, Dan?' she said. 'What's happened to…our son now?' She sounded like a tired nurse forced to deal with a difficult patient.

Daniel shook his head and made a helpless gesture with his open hands. 'I hardly know how to explain it. We went for a spin out into the country, because of the weather, and found this village. Marc got — taken up by some people there. Religious maniacs, I think: something like that. I'm not sure if he went off with them because he wanted to, or if he was kidnapped. '

Emma took her turn at shaking her head. 'Anyway, he won't be back. Is that the idea?'

'Of course he'll be back. We must go and find him. I'll call the police. With their help. '

'Oh, no, Dan. Please don't do that. Not the police. I couldn't bear to go through all that again.'

'Again? What do you mean *again?'*

'You forget, Dan,' Emma said sorrowfully. 'You *do* forget. I envy you that, if nothing else. Because we've been through this so many times before. But, as I said, you don't remember.'

Daniel, swaying slightly from the hips as though he were giddy, stared almost shamefully down towards his boots, like a reprimanded child. Then he seemed to take courage and glanced up into Emma's eyes. He turned away at once from what he saw there, and began, slowly and thoughtfully, to massage his temples with the fingers of both hands.

'You don't seem to understand, Em,' he said, slurring the penultimate word like a drunk. 'I tell you the boy's *gone.'*

'He *has,* Dan. That's true, I know.' Emma's hands were mobile too; her clasped fingers twisted restlessly together against her chest, inches below her chin. 'He's long gone.'

'And those people have him now,' Daniel continued, with quiet desperation. 'They were so small, and they seemed harmless, but I realize now they were evil, malevolent. They lured me there somehow, because they wanted Marc. God knows what for. We've got to save him. We have to try.'

'It's much too late, Dan.'

'Why do you say that?'

'Because I can't take much more of this. It gets worse every time, because you have a different crazy story every time. They get crazier, in fact. I don't want to listen to any more. I'm scared I might crack,

and end up like you.'

Daniel blinked foolishly, and gave her an uncomfortable, mirthless smile. 'You're angry, Em. I can feel it. That's okay. I expected it. But believe me, what happened to Marc wasn't my fault.'

Emma retreated a few inches back behind the edge of the door. 'I know, Dan. I know. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said what I did just then. I'd better go now, before I say something to hurt you. Please leave me alone, and please *don't* go to the police. They won't find Marc, and nor will you, so forget everything that happened today.'

'You don't want me to do *anything,* Em?'

'Just go home. Get some rest. You look terribly tired.'

Daniel's body twitched, as though he had received a shock. 'That's right. I am.'

'Will you be okay driving?'

'Sure.'

Something seemed to have passed out of Daniel. His face had emptied and left him looking totally vacant. He was suddenly compliant. To Emma's relief, he raised a hand in a gesture of capitulation or valediction, and turned and shambled off towards his car. She watched him pass through the gate before she shut the front door and trudged upstairs to her flat.

She knew the rest of the day would be hard for her. As soon as she was back in her room she phoned a friend and almost forced her out for an evening meal. Emma was determined that she would not to be alone with her memories of the one child she had conceived, but lost ten years ago.

There was a small parcel in his pocket. He took it out, glanced at it, and set it down between the handbrake and the driver's seat. Where had he got that from? Gift-wrapped in gold and silver paper, it seemed somehow familiar. Before driving away, Daniel absentmindedly reached for it, picked it up again, and made an effort to remember where he had seen it before. For some reason, he expected it to be quite heavy and hard, but it wasn't either. Whatever it contained was light and soft.

Daniel held the package up in front of him to give it a closer look. He saw the paper was creased and frayed, and partly faded — by sunlight, presumably, so, it had been around for some considerable time! When, after some moments, he still could not identify it, or recall whence it had come, he fumbled it open, rolling it in his hands and pressing with his thumbs to tear the paper to reveal what was inside.

He was mildly surprised to find it contained a fanciful, rather ridiculous woollen hat: the kind currently favoured by streetwise kids.

The price ticket was still attached. Obviously, it had never been worn.

* * *

Terry Lamsley's stories have been published in a number of horror anthologies, notably The Best New Horror, The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror, The Year's Best Horror Stories, Lethal Kisses, The Mammoth Book of Dracula and the first volume of Dark Terrors. Magazine appearances include Ghost & Scholars, All Hallows and Cemetery Dance. Ash-Tree Press published a collection of his stories, Conference With the Dead, and a hardcover reprint of his first collection, Under the Crust, recently appeared from the same publisher. 'A village very like the one described in "The Lost Boy Found" exists somewhere in Yorkshire,' Lamsley reveals, 'but I'd better not name it. I went there for a weekend a couple of years ago, with a couple of friends, to play out a pool contest. It probably is a very nice place, but it seemed very peculiar and otherworldly to me, even in broad daylight. I was extremely pleased to get out of there in one piece. To make things worse, I lost the contest by a wide margin.'